PILGRIMS OF POISON VALLEY

FRANK C. ROBERTSON

A Wild [illegible] Story



PUBLISHED BY COLLINS

Adventure in the West

BIRDIE SATTERFIELD's gang was the most savage, uncivilised bunch of outlaws that ever spat on the sand. Their hideout was a secluded valley in the wilds of Utah, from which they sallied forth periodically to prey upon the scattered ranches of that sparsely populated country. But Val Heaton and his partner Bill Gentry penetrated the secrets of Poison Valley. How they came to grips with the gang in a hard-fought conflict provides a full measure of excitement in a grand Western by that ever-popular author Frank C. Robertson.

PRICE IN INDIA
FOURTEEN ANNAS



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FRANK C. ROBERTSON



WILD WEST CLUB

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CHAPTER I

VAL HEATON propped his head on his elbow and listened. He was not used to sleeping on springs and a mattress, and it took very little to bring him awake. The deep breathing on the other side of the bed told him his old side-kick was sleeping soundly. That was one of the queer things about old Bill Gentry. When he felt himself safe a clap of thunder couldn't disturb him. When there was danger a cat couldn't tread lightly enough to get past his bed unheard.

For a minute Val wasn't sure that he had heard anything. The sleepy little town of Tompkin Spring on the edge of the desert was still as the desert itself. It had been nearly midnight when Val and Bill had turned in, and he had been asleep. It must now be anyway three o'clock.

The silence was shattered suddenly by a woman's scream. Val's feet struck the floor. He fumbled for his gun; saw that Gentry was beside him. A second or so later came the report of a gun, followed instantly by too many shots to count. The shots had sounded from the small creek that flowed through the town.

Val sprang to the window as old Bill demanded, "What the hell was that?"

"I don't know, but I reckon we'd better find out," Val said. A moment later he heard other people stirring.

He dressed in approximately half a minute, and rushed down the stairs. The landlord was standing in the front door with little on except his pants.

"What happened?" a voice asked shrilly.

"I dunno," the stupid looking boniface answered. "Sounds like them shots come from down by the crick where that old man an' girl camped to-night. They got in right after sundown, bought some groceries an' made camp. Said they didn't want no rooms because they'd be pullin' out long 'fore daylight."

Val didn't wait to hear more. Bill Gentry was beside him, and they headed in the direction from which the shots had come.

"Look!" Val said, pointing. For just a moment half a dozen horsemen were limned against the grey skyline, and then they galloped out of sight. Val broke into a run.

A minute later he stopped beside a camp. There was a tent, a buckboard, and a pair of mules snorting wildly around a willow bush to which they were tied. Val heard a groan from under the buckboard. He ran over and knelt beside

a bed that had been made under the rig. A man was lying on his face, half in and half out of the bed. He held a gun in his outstretched hand. Val turned him over. He saw a thin old man with a sparse beard.

"What's the trouble?" Val asked.

"They got her," the old man said weakly. "Them damn' Satterfields. They—followed us.. I—I—tried to—to save her. Now they'll make her—marry—Clay Satterfield."

"Who is she? What's her name? What's your name?" Val pressed, as he saw the crowd coming.

"Her name's Idy May—I—I'm old Ezra—Cupples." The man's head rolled helplessly sideways, and Val knew that he was dead. He got to his feet.

"What is it. Who's hurt?" the crowd was babbling.

"There's a dead man here, and there may be more. If we get anywhere we've got to keep our heads. First, let's see if there's anybody inside this tent," Val said quietly.

There was a bed that was still warm. As Val lighted a match he saw a girl's stocking at the foot of the bed. He snapped out the match, and without quite knowing why he did it, held the stocking against his cheek for a moment before thrusting it back into the bed.

"There was a girl here," the landlord was saying.

"What did she look like?" Val asked.

"It was after dark. I didn't see her very good, but she was purty. Looked to be a blonde, an' kinda small. I remember now she seemed scared as the dickens, an' the old man acted a heap nervous."

"Does anybody here know anything about the Satterfields?" Val asked.

"The Satterfields! Lord, yes. Them's the pizenest outlaws that ever branded another man's horse. But they hang out down in the Dirty Devil country. If they had a hand in this——"

Val saw fear come over the crowd. The men began to look furtively as though expecting the dreaded outlaws to appear any minute.

"What makes yuh think it was the Satterfields?" a man asked.

"I thought the old man mentioned them just as I got to him."

"If there was a gal here what's become of her?" Bill Gentry demanded.

"There was a bunch of riders went over the hill yonder—at least half a dozen of them. They must have grabbed this girl, and killed her father. If we're going to do anything about it we'd better get some horses and get busy."

"Not me, stranger," a man said. "If the Satterfields have got her they can have her. I don't want that outfit

strikin' back at me." The opinion seemed to be unanimous.

"No use, Val, we couldn't do nothin' till mornin'," Bill Gentry said.

They were now examining the dead man. He had been shot five times. It was strange that he had lived to speak a single word. Val had decided that it would be just as well not to mention what the dead man had told him. It might mean a long delay to answer questions—and he was anxious to be away.

But he was anxious to find out what he could about the Satterfields.

"I'll tell yuh all that's knowed about 'em," the keeper of the livery stable said when Val questioned him shortly after daybreak. "It's been 'bout fifteen years since they was first heard of around here. People say they come from the south somewheres. There was the old man, the old lady, an' half a dozen kids. They was tough from the beginnin'.

"First thing they started a tradin' post down on the Colorado. They got in with Bull Becker's gang of outlaws. Finally, they moved back up into a wild, secluded country in southern Utah, an' since then they been real outlaws. They've gathered others around 'em till now nobody knows how many they be."

"Some say ole Bull Becker hisself lives with 'em," a gawky young helper volunteered.

"But he ain't the leader," the stableman asserted positively. "Neither is ole man Satterfield any more. It's Cross-eyed Birdie."

"Cross-eyed Birdie?" Val queried.

"Yep. She's the wife o' the oldest Satterfield boy—Lije. There bein' a shortage o' wimmin in the outlaw country a few years ago Lije an' Frost, the two oldest, went back to North Carolina where they come from, an' brought back wives. Never heard nothin' about Frost's wife, but I've heard plenty 'bout the t'other one. Seen her, too. Man, she's a looker from 'way back. Tall, dark, an' han'some. But her eyes is so plumb crossed yuh'd swear she was lookin' down her own back.

"Anyhow, the last few years, she leads 'em on all their raids, an' they do say she's fiercer than a treed wild-cat. Gin'rally believed she's the real leader now," the man concluded.

Val and Bill sauntered back to the trading post where the body of the old man awaited the arrival of officials from the distant county seat.

"Bill, git to spinnin' one o' them tall yarns o' yourn, an' gather a crowd around the front if you can," Val said. "They didn't search the dead man, an' I want to."

"Yuh won't ketch me robbin' the dead, an' as fer that insinuation that I ever tell anything but the gospel truth, I resent it," Bill Gentry said. "However, jest tuh humour ye I'll tell 'em 'bout the time me an' Jim Bridger licked seven hundred Injuns by turnin' loose three, four nests o' hornets we'd captured an' trained a-purpose tuh hunt Injuns."

Val grinned and waited around until Bill was well embarked on a tall story. Seeing that the audience, which included most of the people at the post, were absorbed in the tale he slipped unobtrusively away. He had been careful to turn the latch of the window close to the dead man, and once outside he looked around to make sure that he wasn't watched, raised the window, and stepped over the sill inside.

He could hear the drone of old Bill's voice from the next room. He could only hope that no one would take a notion to look in on the corpse.

The body of the man who called himself Ezra Cupples lay upon a bed which had been covered with a canvas to save the bedding. Someone had laid a couple of silver half-dollars on his eyes; otherwise he had been unmolested. His face was covered with a stubble of greyish beard, and in repose it was a kindly, rather weak face; certainly not a vicious one.

The man was plainly dressed. Only his boots and hat were missing. The fact that he had gone to bed with his pants and shirt on indicated that he might have been anticipating trouble.

Val couldn't be sure that he was the first one to go through the old man's pockets. All he found was a buckskin wallet containing a few pieces of gold and silver, a pocket-knife, and a few odds and ends such as any man might have. There was nothing in the coat and vest hanging on a nearby chair to give any better clue.

Val felt for a money belt, but the man was not wearing one. But in searching Val's groping fingers moved up between the shirt and undershirt, and just below his left arm he felt the crinkle of paper.

Excited now, he moved to the door and listened. Old Bill's voice droned on, but his tone indicated that he was drawing to the end of his tale. Someone might step in any instant. Val turned back, unbuttoned the undershirt, and discovered a secret pocket sewed on the inside. It had no opening and Val had to use his pocket-knife. He drew out a long, flat packet wrapped in oilcloth.

There was sudden movement in the next room. Somebody was at the door. Val hastily stuck the packet inside his own pocket and jerked down the dead man's shirt.

He landed outside the window just as the door was thrown open.

"Hey, Windy, didn't yuh shut this winder?" a voice called. "Dammit, man, a cat might git in."

"Hell, I did shut it," the boniface replied.

"Well, she's open——"

Val heard no more. He was around at the front, mingling with the crowd. He caught old Bill's disapproving eye. Val nodded toward the livery barn, and Bill got up.

"We've walked this path so damn' many times I know the feel of every pebble on it," Bill complained. "I hope yuh left the half-dollars on the dead man's eyes. I don't mind a little robbery at times, but that would be goin' too fur."

"I left 'em," Val nodded. "Also, I left some eighty dollars in his pants pockets. This is an honest community. Must be in the air."

"Mebbe that's why I'm gittin' tired of it," Gentry said. "Why don't we git to hell out of here before the law comes? They may keep us here askin' questions for a week."

"I'm agreeable. I reckon we'd better stock up on grub enough to last us a month."

"But we was gonna wait till we got tuh Gran' Junction where grub would be cheaper."

"Only we ain't goin' that way," Val said. "We're goin' south."

"South? Hell, that's desert, an' we just come from a desert. I don't need any more deserts."

"Listen, Bill, you an' me are footloose. It don't matter a whoop where we go. I don't like that murder last night. That girl and the old man were tryin' to git away from the Satterfields. From what I hear they're the most savage, uncivilized bunch of killers an' outlaws that ever spit in the sand. The old man said he was trying to get the girl away, an' now she'd have to marry one Clay Satterfield. I'm goin' down into the Dirty Devil country where they're said to hang out an' find that girl."

"Aim to marry 'er?" Bill asked.

"Marry her? Hell, I ain't never even seen her."

"The man says she was purty as a pictur'."

"You don't have to go, Bill. Yuh know I ain't got no leadin' strings on you."

Old Bill uttered a sound that was part growl, part profanity. "What did yuh take off that dead man?" he asked in a low voice.

"I don't know yet. Whatever it was I figger that girl has got a better right to it than anybody up here has. Anyway, it gives me an excuse to take it to her," Val answered.

"I sure figger we're headin' into trouble," Bill Gentry said. "But saddle up, an' let's go."

CHAPTER II

PUSHING their way across a hot and dusty desert was no unusual experience for the young man and the old man whose lives had become so closely intertwined. Low, dull-grey hills covered with sage and rabbit brush, and populated by prairie dogs and rattlesnakes were constantly advancing in front, and receding behind them. There seemed to be no end to them. Off to their left loomed row upon row of gigantic white and vermilion cliffs as straight edged and flat as the pages of a monstrous book.

" Gawd, what a country," Bill Gentry said. " Mojave an' Death Valley ain't got much on this. A month later an' we'd melt down in our tracks."

" We'll hit Green River before dark, an' follow her down to the next jump-off," Val said.

They were well mounted on fine animals bred from Indian cayuses and blooded stock brought into Oregon from California years before, and called Oregon George horses. Val's mount was a roan ; Bill's a black, and they led two bay pack animals almost the equal of the horses they rode. They were fixed for a long stay anywhere they chose to go.

Shortly before dusk they came upon a broad, sweeping river fighting its way through as wild a country as even the Wild West afforded. There was more vegetation here, timber ; higher, greener hills. They knew, however, that they would have still other deserts to cross.

They unpacked, hobbled their horses, and while Bill prepared supper Val looked for signs. All day he had been hoping to cross the tracks made by the buckboard, but in vain. In that immense country it was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Presently Val came and sat down by the fire. He took out the packet he had got off the dead man and fingered it curiously.

" Why the hell don't yuh open it ? " Gentry demanded.

" I've been wondering why I don't," Val said. " I'm afraid there's nothing but money. If that's all it puts me in the position of bein' a thief, an' I don't like it."

" Open 'er up," Bill commanded. " If it's jest money I'll take 'er an' ease your conscience."

The oilcloth, too was sewed. Val took out his knife and cut the threads. What he saw was a packet of greenbacks in hundred dollar denominations. There were twenty-one of them.

"Twenty-one hundred dollars!" he said. "Ezra Cupples wasn't a pauper."

He had merely turned the corners. He fingered the ends of the bills absent-mindedly, and suddenly he saw the end of a thin, white paper in the centre. He split the packet in two and unfolded the single sheet of paper.

There was writing on it in a cramped, illiterate hand.

"to Hoom it May conCern. my Name is ezra CupPles. i come frum the blu Ridge mountings twenty yer ago with jammes Saterfeel two yers later we went bak an' kidnape a gerl chile who was the dater uv a eneMy uv ourn. Beein razed like she has bin i Rekin she ud be haper without Knoin who she wuz This girl is Name idy May SaterFeel but ain't no Relashun. i' ezra CupPles is grown fond uv this gerl an ef i die mong strangers i want this muny fer her. give it to her privut and hep her git away frum pizen vle valey to where she kin live decen an obleege yor Humbel serVunt

E CupPles."

Val read the note over a second time aloud.

"Well, looks like yuh got a job fer yorese'f," Gentry said.

"It sure looks like it," Val admitted. "'Poison Valley.' It looks like he was really trying to get the girl away from the Satterfields to keep her from having to marry one of 'em. They followed, killed Cupples, an' took the girl back. Bill, we got ourselves a job if them Satterfields is as tough as people say."

"I 'low yo're right," Bill said, as he snatched a frying pan of burning bacon from the fire. "But how yuh gonna find this Pizen Valley? An' havin' found it what yuh gonna do about it?"

"If there was more time we might hunt up the girl's folks, but if they aim to do what Cupples thought we better find the place and worry about gittin' away later."

"Be ca'm. You might draw a circle five hundred miles across an' Pizen Valley be anywhere inside it. Yuh shore won't find it on any map."

"All I know is this: the Satterfields must be on some tributary of the Colorado. Up at the post they said it might be on the Dirty Devil, so that's where we're hittin' for."

"Of course experience ain't wuth a damn, but if it was me I'd trail down the river here, watchin' fer trails takin' off, or mebbe run on to some tradin' post or prospector's cabin," Bill suggested.

"Six of one, half-dozen of the other," Val conceded.

It was rough going. How Cupples had managed to get out of that country in a buckboard was a puzzle. How anyone had ever got a buckboard in there in the first place

was a mystery. Certainly Cupples and the girl hadn't come out the way they were going in.

Under ordinary circumstances Val wouldn't have worried. He believed in going through life in a leisurely manner. If he didn't arrive to-day he would arrive to-morrow—or next year. But now a girl's future happiness, even her life might be at stake, and enough chivalry remained in the twenty-six-year-old cowpuncher to make him want to do something about it.

Four days of hard riding, however, had disclosed no sign of the outlaw valley they sought. They were in the heart of a wild country. They had caught glimpses of wild cattle now and then, but they had seen far more deer and almost as many cougars as they had seen cattle. And they had not seen a human being.

They had been forced to leave the wild rough canyon of the river, but they encountered cross canyons almost as wild and difficult to cross. Finding water for camping purposes was often a problem.

"Some place down on the river is a place called Cox's Landing," Bill Gentry declared. "This Cox is said to know every bad man ever hit this country. He'd certainly know all about the Satterfields. Only thing is I doubt if we kin git to his place from this direction."

"I've come too far now to turn back," Val said stubbornly.

The afternoon of the fifth day they heard the thunder of a river which they thought must be the Colorado, although they had left that stream off to their left.

Coming out on the brink of the canyon they looked straight down for hundreds of feet to where a turgid, yellow river hurled itself rebelliously against the high black walls of the chasm.

"The Dirty Devil!" Bill breathed. Their eyes roved up and down. There was no place anywhere that a man could get down into that deep, dangerous cleft in the earth.

"If we did get down we might find ourselves with an uncrossable river on each side of us," Bill declared. "We've got to go up this one till we find a crossin'."

Val knew that his friend was right, much as he hated the waste of time. But there was the remote chance that they might stumble on to the place they sought. It lacked an hour till sundown when Val suddenly noticed a horse track. They got off, examined it critically. A single horse had come and gone along a trail that was dim and old. The tracks, they judged, were no more than two days old.

They turned and followed the tracks. In half a mile they came to the brink of the canyon again, and stopped. There was a saucer-like depression just below the rim where the

trail ended abruptly. On the hard flat rocks no tracks were visible. There was a straight drop-off to the river of over a hundred feet, but below the saucer a sort of sandbar cove ran up to within perhaps sixty feet of the rim. Leaning over, Val's hawklike eyesight made out human tracks. His shout brought Bill Gentry on the lope.

"Somebody is down there," Bill admitted, "but how the hell he got there is more than I can see. He couldn't come from 'cross the river, 'cause there the wall crowds right in, an' is three hundred feet high if it's an inch. An' near as I kin see this cove is shut in from above an' below."

Val didn't dispute the diagnosis. The only way to find out if there was somebody down there was to try to attract his attention. He leaned over and yelled, and the startled cliffs sent his voice echoing and re-echoing from side to side of the canyon.

It was perhaps ten minutes later when they saw a human form climbing the sandbar.

"My God!" Val breathed in awe.

They had never seen such a creature as this. It was a skinny old man with nothing on but a tattered shirt with only strips of rags dangling from the shoulders, and trousers which were worn off to the knees. His feet were wrapped in pieces of cowhide which made his shanks look even more skinny and frail than they were. His long matted grey hair hung down around his shoulders, and his beard reached half-way down his chest. A ghost could not have given either of the men more of a shock.

"Who are you?" Val called.

The old man stopped and rested his hands upon his bony hips as he looked upward. Val would not have been surprised to hear him burst into prophecy. His voice floated up shrill and clear.

"Who wants to know?"

"How can we get down there?"

"You kin jump," came the reply.

"Well, can you come up here?"

The answer was an outburst of as hideous profanity as they had ever listened to. "What the hell do you think I am—an eagle? Kin you see any wings?" the apparition finished.

"Well, we thought maybe you wanted help," Val said. "If you don't we'll just say so-long."

"Help? O' course I want help. I wanta get outa this damned hole. So would you if yuh'd lived here fer three years on lizards, bull-frogs an' craw-dads."

"Yuh mean you *can't* get out?"

"That's just what I mean. I been here fer three years."

Val and Bill looked at each other, horror in their eyes. Three years in a place where it didn't look like a man could live a week! Yet the old man's appearance indicated that he was not lying.

"How in the world did you ever get down there?" Val called. He suddenly remembered the horse tracks that had brought them to the spot. "Look," he added. "You had a visitor two days ago. What are you givin' us?"

Ensued another burst of profanity in which the hermit seemed to be calling down anathema upon the person who had been there recently.

"If you want help you'll have to cool down," Val shouted.

"Just git me out of here—I'll do anything." The oldster's tone changed to a whine.

"All right, but we're curious," Val answered. "If we let down our ropes and haul you up we'll expect you to answer our questions truthfully."

"If yuh don't we kin send yuh back down a heap faster than we kin haul yuh up," Bill Gentry contributed.

"All right, I'll answer anything," the skinny one replied, but his voice was less emphatic. "Jest git me up outa here."

"Anything you want to bring?"

"Hell, what d'ye think I'd have down here wuth bringin' out," came the snarling reply.

"Sweet-tempered old cuss," Val commented. "Still, I reckon we wouldn't be too good-natured ourselves if we'd spent three years down there livin' on lizards. I don't believe, I could relish even one lizard let alone havin' 'em fer a steady diet."

They tied their lariats together and let them down to the highest point the hermit could reach. There was hardly rope enough left for old Bill to take a dally on the saddle horn.

"Holler when you're ready," Val called.

The oldster fastened the rope around his body under his arms and told them he was ready. Val had found a place where he could brace his feet and pull on the rope, while Bill took most of the load with his Barney horse. But with even the weight of the old man's slight frame dangling at the end of the long rope it was an effort. But by dint of Val holding the weight while Bill kept shortening his dallies the old man was hauled up to where Val could reach down and drag him out on the rimrock.

The benevolent appearance the old man had seemed to have at a distance was completely belied at short range, and the profanity he had used was completely compatible with the wicked gleam in his fierce black eyes. Part of that feverish gleam, however, they were to find out came from semi-starvation.

The old man looked at them with terrible intensity. " First human face I've seen at close range since I was putt down there to die," he said half-apologetically. He looked up at the sky, raising both thin arms as high as he could above his head. " Gawd, but it feels good to be free again," he cried.

" Who put you down there ? " Val asked.

" The Satterfields, damn 'em—that infernal cross-eyed she-wolf that leads 'em putt 'em up to it. If I kin git me a gun——" He stopped, his eyes suddenly full of suspicion. " You Satterfield men ? " he demanded.

" No, but we're huntin' for 'em. Now suppose you tell us who you are, an' why they put you down there," Val suggested crisply.

The old man's feverish eyes roved to the packs on their horses. " You got grub," he said. " I want somethin' to eat. Then I'll talk."

" Yuh better talk right now if yuh don't want another free trip down over that cliff," Bill threatened.

" No," Val said. " We'll feed him first."

CHAPTER III

LITTLE MORE than twenty miles from where Val and Bill had rescued the old man was a little valley as beautiful as a tropical island in its setting of orange and vermilion cliffs surmounted by a flat mesa covered with virgin forests of yellow pine. The valley itself was but a sunken depression in the middle of the mesa, and it opened out into a narrower, deeper canyon through a defile that could be overlooked from a distance of more than a few hundred yards away. It was a place that could be discovered only by accident.

Inside this valley were a group of log buildings and corrals, invisible from the valley's rim, or from the single opening into the larger canyon, which in turn opened into the mightier canyon of the Dirty Devil. A clear flowing little creek issuing from a spring near the head of the valley afforded ample water. Not far from the cluster of houses a vegetable garden grew thriftily. Rose bushes grew in the yard of one of the buildings, and there was even a small orchard irrigated from the creek.

One of the houses was larger than the others. It was low and rambling ; a huge single room, large enough to have been a dance hall, was across the front, while perhaps twenty smaller rooms ran out to form a huge, crude letter E. The floor of the big room was covered with Indian rugs. More rugs hung upon the walls, with Indian baskets and silver

and turquoise jewellery decorating the tables. Opening from this room was a slightly smaller, less bizarre dining-room, with tables which could seat thirty or forty people.

This was the rendezvous of the Satterfields.

There were perhaps fifteen people seated at one of the long tables. Breakfast was being served by two flat-faced Indian girls. A negro cook occasionally looked in from the kitchen to see that all was well. At the head of the table sat a woman whose hair was as black as the Indian girls', but whose skin would have been creamy white save for the tan. Her long, slender fingers were covered with silver and turquoise rings, and her wrists jangled with bracelets of the same kind. But her noticeable feature was a pair of badly crossed eyes—eyes which in spite of the deformity were certainly magnetic if not beautiful. There was no other woman at the table. At a sign from her the men arose. No queen could have been more regal in dealing with her subjects.

" You, Lije, Frost, Clay, and Ulas, I want to see you in the big room," she stated.

The four men, obviously brothers, for all that they differed in appearance, preceded her into the big room. They remained standing with a kind of awkward respect until she came in and seated herself in a big wicker chair. Three of the men seated themselves facing her; the fourth and youngest, and only brunette among the men, placed his hands on the back of her chair and leaned over her familiarly. The woman smiled, reached up and patted his hand.

" Git away from thar," Lije Satterfield growled suddenly. He was the oldest of the Satterfields, a tall, thin, saturnine man with a discontented face.

" He's all right. I like him right where he is," the woman said.

" Why don't yuh feed Lije poison an' marry Ulas an' be done with it, Birdie," Frost Satterfield spoke up. He was big and blonde, surpassed in size only by his younger brother Clay.

" Ulls is the only one of you big louts knows how to treat a woman," Birdie said. " If Clay had his manners he'd have got Ida May to marry him long ago."

Ulysses, the only one that could possibly be called handsome, grinned at his brothers, and Elijah, Birdie's husband, clinched his fists.

" He'd better let Idy May alone if he wants tuh keep on livin'," the huge Clay ground out. " If I was Lije I'd knock him off yore chair, too."

" How you fellows kept out of the hands of the law as long as you did is more than I can see," the woman said.

"Your father must've had more brains than all his boys—except Ulas."

"What did yuh want to see us about?" Frost demanded.

"About Ida May. If we don't break her spirit she'll never marry Clay, an' I won't have her around here makin' trouble. If the law ever finds out this place she'd be the one to betray us."

"Not if she was my wife," Clay said savagely.

"Then make her marry you," Birdie snapped. She tapped a silver bell and one of the Indian girls appeared. "You, Nancy, take this key and bring Ida May here."

The Indian girl took the key, went along the court to a square, poorly furnished room without a window. She unlocked the door and muttered, "Birdie say come."

A small, graceful girl with wide blue eyes and yellow curls came to the door. She blinked her eyes at the light, raised her hands to smooth down her hair. The Indian girl seized her arm and hustled her along. She didn't resist physically, but her soft lips formed a stubborn line, and her eyes hardened. She didn't attempt to conceal her repugnance at the sight of Clay Satterfield.

The Indian girl led her to where she had to face the whole group and then disappeared.

"Well, Ida May," the cross-eyed woman said, "have you made up your mind to stop this nonsense and marry Clay?"

"I'll die before I'll marry him," the girl said simply.

"You'll certainly die if you don't," Birdie replied.

"That'll be all right. You murdered Uncle Ezra Cupples, I suppose you can murder me," the girl said.

"Now look, Idy May," Clay whined. "Yo're an orphant. The Satterfields raised you. You owe us somethin'. Jest marry me an' be one o' the family."

"Like Della," the girl finished. "I'd die first."

"Look," Frost roared, "did my wife he'p you an' ole Cupples tuh run away? If she did I'll beat her till——"

"You'd beat your own mother, too. But neither one of them knew a thing about it. Uncle Ezra did it alone."

"And plenty trouble he caused, too," Birdie said. "If old Quanney hadn't seen those buckboard tracks you might have got clear away. I'd feel safer if I knew the boys killed him too dead to talk."

"He was dead all right," Clay said. "We riddled him."

Ida May shuddered.

"You still say you won't marry Clay?" Birdie asked softly.

"I say I never will. I don't owe you anything. If I was an orphan I've earned my keep. Oh, why don't you let me

go? I'll not tell anything I know about you," the girl pleaded.

"Huh! You expect us to believe that?" Birdie laughed. "I'll tell you what you'll do. You'll marry Clay like you ought, or we'll give you to old Quanney to sell to them young Injun bucks of his. They won't dare take you back so you'll last about a week. But it won't be a pleasant week—especially at the wind-up."

Ida May's knees gave way suddenly and she slumped to the floor. The men looked at her wolfishly. Birdie Satterfield's expression did not change.

"Well, are you ready to marry Clay?" Birdie asked.

"No, oh, no," the girl cried.

"We'll give you a week to make up your mind. A week on bread and water—and you won't have any chance to kill yourself either. We'll let you see old Quanney every day. He'll get a good price for you from them young bucks. He says they like to amuse themselves with young white girls."

Birdie rang for the Indian girl, but she in turn had to call for her mate to help carry the weeping girl back to the dark log room.

"Yuh wouldn't do that to her, would yuh, Birdie?" the cross-eyed woman's husband asked, almost timidly.

"I certainly will—if she don't marry Clay. Now you fellows had better get rid of them horses you was starting north with when she run off."

The men slouched out. "By Gawd, it seems like we kain't eat no more unless we take orders from her," Frost growled. "It's what comes o' you bein' hen-pecked, Lije. If yuh's handled her like I did Delly——"

"Yuh don't handle a streak o'lightnin', an' that's what Birdie is," Ulas, the youngest, snickered.

"She han'les things better'n the old man ever did, an' you fellers said you wouldn't stan' fer me bein' leader," Lije said. 'I'm damn' if I kin see that either Frost or Clay could be half as smart."

"I still don't like bein' bossed by a woman," Frost growled. "Five years ago she was just a cross-eyed floosey that nobody would marry, now she queens it like she owned the earth. Why the hell, Lije, couldn't yuh be satisfied tuh marry a plain farm gal like Delly?"

"You keep yore Delly. Birdie may be cross-eyed but she's a heap smarter than any Satterfield that ever shot at a revenoor," Lije said, with a trace of pride.

The men saddled up, packed extra horses, and prepared to start. They had to dispose of a head of horses in the north, which they had bought from Indian horse thieves who had stolen the animals from far to the south. In the past two

or three years their nefarious business had become nicely organized under the leadership of Birdie Satterfield. They had outlaw connections from the Mexican border to Montana. In their secluded retreat here in southern Utah they were hundreds of miles from the nearest settlement. There was no more prospect of the law coming in after them than there was of Sunday coming in the middle of the week. The county officials were helpless, and the territorial officials of the time were carpet-baggers with no concern for the scattered stockmen who suffered from the depredations of the organized outlaw bands.

Only one of the Satterfields remained behind. That was Frost, whose duty it was to look after what purported to be a respectable cattle ranch.

Before the men rode away a woman with stringy grey hair, who looked far older than her actual years, came out to the corral. She was barefooted and held a pipe between her toothless gums.

" Whar be ye goin' this time, boys ? " she queried.

" Jest sellin' some stock up no'th, Ma," Lije answered. "Mebbe we'll pick us up some good stock from Wyomin' tuh trade inter Mexico. Anything yuh want us tuh bring ye, Ma ? "

" Yes, brang me ha'f-dozen new corn cob pipes, an' sum purty calico if ye git to a store. I aims tuh do a heap o' sewin' gittin' ready fer Clay an' Idy May's marryin'."

" All right, Ma," Lije promised. Despite the wildcat he had married, Lije was the kindliest one of the Satterfields.

" Where's Idy May ? " the old woman queried of Frost, after the others had ridden away.

"You jest never min' 'bout Idy May. Birdie's lookin' after her," Frost said curtly.

Mrs. Satterfield turned and trudged back to the little one room cabin that had been her home since Birdie had taken over. Close by was a slightly larger cabin where another woman, prematurely stooped, bent over a wash tub. This was Delly, Frost's wife. Delly looked up dully.

" Know whut they done ter Idy May ? " she queried.

" Birdie's got her," the older woman said, and seated herself upon a bench, where she smoked and dreamed of bygone days.

Delly returned to her washing. These days she seldom spoke to anyone except her mother-in-law or Ida May. She wondered sometimes how her own life would have changed so completely in five years. She had been a simple, illiterate daughter of a North Carolina farmer—" pore white trash," she knew. Then Frost and Lije Satterfield had appeared. They were well dressed, and had plenty of money. Frost had courted her for a month, and she had married him.

She knew that the Satterfields had left the country some twenty years before, and old man Satterfield's reputation was not good. He and another man, named Ezra Cupples, whom she was later to know, had served time. But that seemed unimportant compared to the obvious success of the younger Satterfields who had come back frankly to find wives because there were few eligible young women in the West.

Delly had been surprised to find that Lije was marrying Birdie Crumwall. The Crumwalls were not poor white trash. Birdie was educated, and her father was a rich, if eccentric farmer. Birdie was the last of a large family of daughters. Nobody had wanted to marry her on account of her crossed eyes. That had made no difference to Lije Satterfield. There had been nothing in common between the two brides. Delly had been stunned to find that the Satterfields were all outlaws, but there was nothing she could do about it. They wouldn't have allowed her to back if she had wanted to. She had merely bowed her back to whatever burdens were put upon her.

Birdie had reacted differently. Too proud to go home and acknowledge a mistake, she had set out to make herself queen of the outlaws, and she had succeeded. Old man Satterfield and his partner, Bull Becker, had opposed her viciously. All Delly knew was that both of them were now gone. Satterfield had died in great agony after eating a big meal. Bull Becker had disappeared. From that time on Birdie had been supreme. She had got old Quanney, the renegade Indian who belonged to the gang, to bring her two Indian girls who were little more than slaves. They, and old Rip, the negro cook whom the Satterfields, had got years before, waited upon Birdie hand and foot. Delly and her mother-in-law and Ida May lived apart. Frost no longer pretended to even eat with his own family, which now included three rather dirty little boys.

Delly knew little about Ida May, except that the yellow-haired girl had never seemed to belong to the Satterfields. She was said to be an orphan. Mrs. Satterfield had intimated several times that Ida May was "quality" if she only knew it.

Delly had felt vaguely sorry for Ida May when they told her she had to marry Clay. She felt that the girl would have to yield, but her dulled spirits had quickened a little with hope that the girl would get away when old Ezra Cupples had unexpectedly tried to help her escape. But Delly had not been surprised when Clay and the others brought her back, and reported that old Ezra was dead.

Ida May was still putting up a fuss, but there was no use for any one to buck the Satterfields, Delly thought hopelessly. Ida May would have to marry Clay in the long run.

CHAPTER IV

VAL AND BILL made camp as quickly as possible, and the old man they had rescued watched the cooking operations with famished eyes. He was obviously having a hard time to keep from seizing some of the food and wolfing it down raw. They couldn't keep him from leaning over the coffee pot, inhaling the delicious fumes. He had not, he told them, tasted coffee for three years.

They didn't attempt to ask any questions until he had eaten, which he did voraciously; stopping only when the food was all gone. Old Bill had wisely put a limit to what he could eat. Seen at close range it was apparent the hermit had once been a big man, despite the gauntness of his frame now.

" Fire," he answered, in response to a question. " Yes, I had fire. Caught driftwood, an' never let it go out, though I been outa matches fer two years, an' that damn' woman wouldn't let me have any more, I know."

" They visited you, though, didn't they ? " Val queried.

" Ever so often. Mebbe every two, three months. I reckon it was longer'n that before Lije come the other day. Their visits been gittin' further an' further apart, an' they leave less grub each time. Each trip I figgered was the last I'd see of 'em."

" But they did bring you food ?"

" Food fer a dawg !" the old man snorted. " Corn meal without even salt, an' sometimes a piece o' rusty bacon. Lije once brought me half a flour sack o' dried apples. What grub they brought would allus be gone before they got back, an' I'd string it out as fur as I could with what varmints I could ketch. Hadn't been fer the bull-frogs an' lizards I'd a starved long ago."

" No fish ? " Bill asked.

" Once in a while I'd ketch me a sucker, but gin'rally this dang river is too muddy fer fish."

" Why didn't you try swimmin' out ?" Val wanted to know.

" Fust place the stream is too swift to swim up-stream at all, an' there's rocks an' eddies right below that would dash a man tuh pieces in a second. In the second place I kain't swim."

The pardners looked at each other. Whatever this profane old man might be he certainly had guts to endure his imprisonment so long.

After he had eaten, Bill Gentry offered the old man his own pipe, and for a moment the fierce black eyes filled with gratitude.

"I reckon tobaccer was the only thing I ever begged 'em fer," he said, "but they jest laughed at me."

"My God!" Val burst out, "what kind of inhuman monsters are they to treat a man like they did you? Why, it's as bad as they used to do to people in the middle ages."

"Don't you ever think them ole witch-hunters had anythin' on Birdie Satterfield when it comes tuh bein' downright inhuman an' cruel. Jest one thing I'm livin' fer—that's tuh git these skinny ole claws o' mine around her white throat an' choke the life outen 'er."

"You musta made them Satterfields plumb mad at yuh," Bill ventured.

"I never harmed a hair o' their danged heads."

"Look," Val said evenly. "We promised to get you out of there if you'd tell us the truth about the Satterfields. That means the truth about yourself, too. You don't seem inclined to be very frank about it. I think you owe us the complete story about yourself."

The old man grinned fiendishly. "You kain't threaten me," he jeered. "You ain't Satterfields. I ain't afeared o' yuh throwin' me back. Law men, ain't yuh?"

"We are not," Val answered crisply. He told the old scoundrel about the death of Ezra Cupples, and the unknown girl they had come to rescue. He said nothing about the money or the note they had taken from Cupples.

The hermit chuckled quietly. "So they killed off ole Ezra after all the years he worked with 'em, eh? Served the ole devil right. Never did have much guts. Why, he had as much tuh do with organizin' that gang as old Jim Satterfield himself, but he never had no voice in nothin', an' got jest whut they chose tuh give him."

"What about the girl?" Val demanded.

"She wa'n't no Satterfield. Whar she come from I never did find out. She were gittin' darn purty when I see her last. I kain't blame her fer not wantin' tuh marry Clay. Outside o' the she-devil herself he's the meanest o' the hull clan—less it's that younger one, Ulas."

"We mean to get that girl away from there. That's all we want," Val said. "If you hate the Satterfields the way you claim you do you'll help us."

"Shore, I'll he'p yuh. You gimme a gun, an' I'll hang around till I kill the last one of 'em. These last three years has showed me how tuh live on lizards if I have to. I mean tuh hang around Pizen Valley till I git 'em all."

"That's not our system," Val said. "We've got to git

inside this Poison Valley some way. We want you to show us where it is."

"I'll do more than that," the old man said. "I'll lead yuh to it. An' I'll tell yuh how to git inside an' jine 'em. By golly, I kin see where we'll have some fun. But yuh gotta go in as outlaws, or yuh wouldn't last a minute."

"If you got a plan you might let us in on it," Val said.

The old man winked and swore. "By Gawd, I'll show 'em yit they can't git the best o' ole Bull Becker," he said.

"Bull Becker!" Val and Bill chorused. "You mean to say you are Bull Becker, the old Nevada outlaw?"

"Shore I'm Bull Becker. I reckon folks think I'm dead, but I'm not. Hell, I was the biggest outlaw in the West when Jim Satterfield an' Ez Cupples was dodgin' revenuers back in No'th Ca'liny. I tuk them two into my gang an' give 'em their start," the old man boasted.

"They certainly seem to have turned the tables on you."

"I was a fool, all right. Satterfield had found this hang-out in Pizen Valley. My gang had about broke up. I figgered I could go in there an' sorta end up my life peaceful, an' still have a bit of excitement. Might have worked out all right, too, if the she-devil hadn't poisoned Satterfield an' took over the gang herself."

"This Birdie Satterfield must be the sweetest thing," Val commented sardonically.

"I tell yuh there's the devil himself in them crossed eyes o' hers," Becker said solemnly. "I don't care who yuh are she does things to yuh. A man's blood kinda freezes up when she looks at yuh, or rather when yuh don't know whether she's lookin' at yuh or not."

"What got her to have it in for you?" Bill asked.

"She wanted my money. She thought I had a big wad laid by somewhere, an' she said if I was goin' to join up with 'em I should hand over my loot. When I wouldn't do it, ner tell 'er where it was she had 'em stick me down in that hole beside the river where I couldn't git out. She said she'd keep me there till I died if I didn't tell. But I out-lasted 'er, b'Gawd."

"Yuh know, Val, I think I could think up places I'd ruther visit than this Pizen Valley," Bill Gentry said.

"So could I," Val snapped. "But I'm thinking of a girl that don't belong in there. If an outlaw who had been with them like Cupples had would give his life to get her away then it must be pretty bad. I'm going on."

"Good!" Bull Becker cackled. "I'll tell yuh how tuh do it. If yuh give the password o' the ole Becker gang yuh kin git in. Gittin' out with the gal will be yore own problem."

Val realized well enough that no one would give him

advice about that. That would have to be solved when the time came. He was only just beginning to comprehend the magnitude of the job he had undertaken.

" If yuh both claimed tuh belong tuh my gang yuh couldn't git away with it," Becker went on. " Yo're old enough tuh have been with me," he said to Bill. " Yuh kin claim yuh picked up the young feller. I had connections in Wyomin' that the Satterfields didn't know about, but they do know the secret passwords. If it was urgent yuh'd jest say, ' Dunk 'em deep.' Later on, if the gang wasn't quite satisfied somebody would ask, casual like, ' Ever cut a side-hill dodger ? ' If anybody ever asks yuh that yuh say, ' Green moon to-night.' There's a secret grip, too, that I'll show ye. I reckon that'll convince the Satterfields yo're all right if the rest o' yore story holds up. Yuh might tell 'em yuh was huntin' fer me."

" It sounds all right," Val said.

" May sound all right, but I'm ready to bet a million dollars against a last year's bird's nest we don't come out alive," Bill said gloomily.

" I'll chance it," Val said. " Tell me more about the girl. Do you know who she is ? How does she talk ? "

" Yuh'll find that out for yourself when, an' if, we git there," Bill said.

" Well, I'm rarin' to go. How far is it, Becker ? "

" Call me Bull," the cadaverous old outlaw commanded. " It ain't half a day's ride. There's a crossin' up the river 'bout four miles, an' then I reckon it may be 'round twenty or twenty-five tuh Pizen Valley. Yuh angle back to the south-east."

Val was anxious to go. At his insistence they went on to the crossing after dark, and unpacked. They didn't bother to unpack anything except their beds. They looked at the old outlaw critically. Neither one was finicky, but the prospect of sharing their blankets with the old sinner was not appealing.

" Never mind me," Bull said, as he sensed their feelings. " Jest loan me a single blanket an' it'll be as good a bed as I've had fer years. I'll jest wander down here an' find me a soft sandbar."

Somewhat suspicious of the old scoundrel the pardners made their beds where he could not get away with their horses without being seen.

It must have been after midnight when Val awoke with the feeling that something was wrong. He lay still for a moment listening. Something was moving around their pile of camp equipment two rods away. It might be a varmint—that often happened. Val waited a moment,

reached for his gun, and raised up on his elbow. An instant later he saw a figure raise up just beyond their dunnage.

"Stop! Don't move!" Val yelled.

The figure seemed to whirl in mid-air. Something grazed Val's cheek, and stuck in the sand behind him. Startled, he fired as the figure made a tremendous leap. He missed.

His yell and the shot brought Bill Gentry up with a roar. Val fired again, but the figure had completely vanished in the darkness.

"Bull!" Val yelled. "Come back here."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than he wished he had kept still. He felt behind him where he had heard the thud in the sand, and his groping fingers encountered the long, steel blade of a knife.

"That thievin' old skunk!" Bill said furiously. "We drag him out o' that hole, feed him——"

"Wait a minute. I'm not so sure it was him. Listen."

It was hard to hear above the roar of the river, but Val was sure he could hear someone scrambling out of the water on the other side; the sound of pebbles being disturbed.

Suddenly Bill let out a howl. "My rifle's gone!"

Val felt for his. It was still there. They investigated the camp. Several boxes of rifle cartridges were missing. So was a slab of bacon. If anything else was gone they didn't miss it at the time.

"The dirty old reprobate—tried to knife you, too," Bill said.

"Somebody did. I'm not sure it was Becker. I don't believe he had a knife."

"If it wasn't him he should be showing up." Bill strolled down the way the man had gone to sleep, but there was no sign of Becker anywhere.

"I don't like it," Gentry said. "All them passwords he give us were prob'ly jest made up in his own head. We go tuh shoutin' 'em tuh that wire-edged female, an' the Satterfield tribe'll be doin' a war dance around our scalps."

They made sure their horses were all right and rolled up in their blankets again, but they got little sleep. They were glad when morning came. The first thing they did was to search the ground for tracks. Becker and one of their rifles were assuredly gone. The tracks made in the sand by his home-made cowhide moccasins could be plainly traced. He had lain down a short distance down the river, but he had got up, rolled the blanket, and slipped back to camp, where he had got the rifle, cartridges and a little food. Most of the time he had crawled on hands and knees, and he seemed to have developed the art of creeping to a high degree.

"It was him all right, the durned old thief," Bill said.

" Wonder he didn't murder us both. Prob'ly would if yuh hadn't happened tuh wake up."

Val didn't answer. His search had taken him down by the river. He saw where Becker had taken to the water, but six feet further down he saw a track in the wet sand that had *not* been made by Becker.

" Hey, Bill !" he yelled. " Come here."

Bill Gentry's eyesight was as good as it ever was, and he could read sign. He studied the track a moment, and straightened.

" Injun ! !" he stated. " That's a pigeon-toed Injun track if ever I see one."

" And I was fool enough to yell out Becker's name at him," Val said bitterly.

" What of it ? This likely was jest a plain Injun thief."

" Maybe an' maybe not. Becker said the Satterfields are in with some Indian renegades. Don't you see, Bill, if this Indian reports to them that Bull Becker was with us they'll investigate right away to see whether he's escaped or not. When they find he has, an' we show up there askin' for him they'll know right off we're fakers."

" She looks bad, all right, unless this was jest a wanderin' thief of an Injun as I suspect he was," Bill admitted. " Looks like it would be better fer me tuh go in alone askin' fer Becker. Then if——"

" No, you don't. If anybody goes in alone I'll go. We can't give it up now, but it would be foolish to go in posin' as friends of Bull Becker. I've got to sneak in—alone—an' try to find that girl."

" By golly, I dunno," Bill said. " If that outfit is as cruel an' bloodthirsty as you say we better find out first if they do know we're in the country."

" How do you mean ? "

" Jest this ; if that Injun does ree-port to 'em 'twon't be long till they'll be back lookin' fer us. I think we'd better not cross this river, but head up the other way a piece, then sneak back an' wait."

Val knew that it meant more delay—delay that might be fatal for the unknown girl in Poison Valley—but still it was sound sense. That was a great thing about old Bill Gentry. He might be illiterate, but no better frontiersman lived, and when he made a suggestion there was always good sound sense behind it.

They didn't wait to cook breakfast. Packing up as quickly as they could, they got back up on the rim, and concealing their horses in the first place available made their way back to a point overlooking the ford.

As the hours passed Val grew more and more restless.

It seemed a sheer waste of precious time to lie there looking across at wild expanse of broken country extending back to where a series of green-topped mesas stood out against the lanscape like gigantic pool tables. Between some of those mesas was the strange valley Bull Becker had told them about where an outlaw gang had found sanctuary for nearly twenty years. If it hadn't been for this delay they would have been half-way there by now.

Val was about to suggest that they give up the vigil when a grunt from Bill Gentry caused him to look hurriedly toward the ford.

Just coming from behind a thick mass of manzanita brush were five men. One of them they could plainly see, even at this distance, was an Indian. The rest, they had no reason to doubt, were members of the Satterfield gang of outlaws.

CHAPTER V.

THE OUTLAWS approached the ford carefully. The pardners saw them stop, while the Indian dismounted, and stooping low examined the ground for tracks. The Indian worked nearer and nearer to the water.

"If I had my ole rifle I bet I could raise his damn' snoot outa the sand," Bill grumbled.

"Take mine," Val suggested, but Bill ignored the offer.

Presently the Indian stopped beside the river, and the other joined him. They stood there a while, scanning the tops of the cliffs on the other side.

"Don't move a hair or that dang redskin'll spot yuh," Bill warned. "They're wonderin' if we've done jest what we have done."

"Suppose they follow our tracks?"

"Then let 'em bump their blamed noses."

Val smiled. Heretofore old Bill had been none too enthusiastic but now the old warrior was getting into the spirit of the thing.

The outlaws splashed across the river, which here in no place was more than four feet deep, and carefully examined the camp site. Occasionally one or another of them would glance up at the rim of the overhanging bluff.

"They're purty much convinced that that Injun scared the daylights out of us last night, an' that we're hot-footin' fer safety," Bill said.

"But they'll make it a point to see if old Becker has escaped," Val pointed out.

"It's that Injun worries me," Bill said. "You stay here an' watch while I go back to the horses."

Val nodded. They had tried to leave no tracks, but one couldn't discount the skill of an Indian tracker—and they couldn't afford to lose their horses.

Perhaps half an hour later he saw just one man riding along the opposite rim on his way to Becker's prison. He could see nothing of the Indian, or the other white men. He waited a few minutes then rejoined Bill. Bill had seen nothing of the Indian either.

"The cuss may have us spotted, though, an' just be watchin'," Bill said. "Let's move on."

They were able to get under way without exposing themselves, and after a mile or so they began to cautiously double back until they were across the side canyon which had led to the ford. It was a grim game of hide and seek they were playing, one for which Val had little liking.

"Let's have a little talk with that hombre who went to see about Becker," Val said. "Somehow, I don't like any cuss who would do a thing like that to another man, even a rapscallion like Bull Becker."

"We shore kain't do ourselves any good with 'em now by claimin' tuh be Becker's friend," Bill said. "We'll go talk to him if yuh want, but I have my doubts about him invitin' us over tuh Pizen Valley fer dinner."

They were able to get back across the side canyon which led to the ford without exposing themselves. The man they sought was long since out of sight but if he came back to the ford he couldn't avoid them.

They were back within sight of the rim where they had found Becker when their man rode out of the saucer just below. He stopped rather uncertainly, then rode slowly toward them. He was cornered, unless he chose ignominious flight down the river.

Val made sure that his gun was loose, and old Bill put on an expression of sheer stupidity.

The man who met them was probably over forty years of age. He was tall, thin and dark. His face wore the wary expression of professional outlaw. There were deep wrinkles in the man's loose-skinned face, and his sullen mouth seemed never to have smiled. He stopped his horse and waited for them to speak.

For an instant Val was tempted to offer the password to see what the man would do, but he refrained. "Howdy, friend," he said quietly, "you see anything of a crazy man around these parts?"

"Crazy man? No. What crazy man?"

"That's what we'd like to know. Comin' along here

lookin' for a crossin' yesterday we heard somebody yellin' bloody murder. When we investigated we saw an old feller down against the river who acted crazy as a loon. Finally, we persuaded him to let us haul him up, but he was jibberin' like a monkey. No sense to his talk at-all. We got him down to the river an' fed him, but in the night he tried to murder us with a knife an' pulled his freight. We hunted for him, but when we couldn't find him we thought mebbe he'd come back to where he'd been hidin'. Crazy folks do that, I've heard."

The man was listening without a change of expression. "What's yore business here, strangers?" he asked.

"Prospectin'," Val answered. "We heard this was a purty wild country. My pard here knows the Colorado lower down. When he was livin' with the Injuns he heard about a rich mine the Navahos know about. We figgered we'd try for that if we couldn't make a strike through this country."

"Ain't the kind o' outfit most prospectors have," the man said bluntly.

"We ain't the kind o' prospectors you generally see; either," Val said. "Sometimes a six-gun beats a pick an' shovel when it comes to gittin' gold."

"Outlaws? Yuh've got a nerve admittin' it to a respect'ble cattleman."

Val laughed softly. "Yore name wouldn't be Satterfield, would it?"

The man raised up in his stirrups, as though minded to voice indignant protest. But he settled back.

"Yes," he said, "my name is Lije Satterfield. What of it?"

"Nothin', only you folks have got a purty wide reputation. We thought we might call on yuh passin' through."

"See here, strangers," Lije said, with real or simulated anger, "us Satterfields run a respectable cattle an' horse ranch. You won't find it easy gittin' away with any of our stuff, an' I advise yuh not tuh try it."

"You've got us all wrong," Val laughed. "We don't care what your business is. We don't monkey with livestock. Too much danger of gittin' a rope around our necks. It's a heap safer to hunt out prospectors who've made a strike. Dead men, you know, tell no tales."

"Yuh talk purty damn' bold," Satterfield said.

"If you people run a cow outfit we know where the cows come from. Just as well be honest, Satterfield. You've got the toughest gang of oultaws ever touched saddle leather, an' we know it. We're just no angels ourselves. Incidentally, how long have you had that crazy man down in this hole, an' what did yuh stick him in for? He gabbled to us somethin' about bein' there a year."

" Tell yuh what his name was ? " Lije asked.

" He said he was called ' Bull,' but right now we're askin' the questions," Val said curtly. " If the rest of yore gang was present it might be different."

" Look," Lije said angrily, " people don't threaten the Satterfields, or give 'em orders—if they know when they're wise."

" Shall I shoot him, Val ? " Bill Gentry asked casually.

Lije looked startled.

" Not just yet," Val said. " We'll give him a chance tuh be friendly. We didn't come here lookin' for trouble, Satterfield, but neither are we lickin' anybody's boots. If yuh aim tuh start a war on us the first fight'll be right here."

Lije betrayed even more surprise, then a look of reluctant admiration that wasn't free from craft came into his eyes.

" Don't git me wrong either," he said. " Us Satterfields is horsepitable people—fer anybody 'cept law men. Fer all I know you may be a pair o' law snoopers. Most outlaws has a password that goes in this country."

Val refused to be trapped into anything which might indicate that Bull Becker had told them anything important. " I don't know about that," he said. " We're a two man gang. You can take us or leave us, but I'm still curious about that crazy man."

" Durned if I don't believe yo're all right," Lije said, his saturnine face almost breaking into a grin. " I tell yuh what. You come on home with me, an' meet my wife. We've heard about that rich Injun mine ourselves. Mebbe we could he'p yuh locate it."

" Fine. What about the crazy man ? "

" Why yuh so all wrought up about him ? "

" Because he wouldn't be the first crazy prospector we've run across, an' we have ways o' makin' 'em tell if they've got any gold cached anywhere," Val said. " Our idee right now is that you was workin' the same gag. Fact is he kinda intimated as much in his ravin's."

" You fellers are too smart fer me," Lije said. " You hit the nail on the head. That ole cuss has got a cache somewhere down on the Dirty Devil, an' we been tryin' tuh make him talk. If we run onto him we'll let you fellers try yore hand."

" Good. An' we'll split fifty-fifty," Val said.

They turned and rode back to the ford. Once Val caught Gentry's eye, and he knew the old timer wasn't too pleased with the developments. Val was aware of the chances they were taking, but at least it offered a way to get into Poison Valley, and it was there the search for the girl called Ida May had to start.

CHAPTER VI

ALTHOUGH RIDING with seeming negligence, and carrying on a conversation with Lije Satterfield, Val had never been more alert than when he approached the ford. He knew that old Bill, riding a little way behind and leading the pack horses, was every bit as vigilant.

Three tough looking specimens sauntered out of the shade as they approached the ford, but the Indian Val had hoped to see was not in evidence.

" Whoa," Lije Satterfield said loudly. " Want yuh tuh meet some o' my cowhands. From front tuh rear, Jack Cradlebaugh, ' Seven-up ' Sorensen, an' Apache Tom. Boys, these are a couple o' purty deep dunkers themselves. What yuh say yuh call yoreselves ? "

The reference to deep dunkers could easily be understood by Bull Becker's information about the " dunk 'em deep " password. Val's gaze flickered rapidly over the trio. It would be hard to state which looked the toughest, although Val was inclined to give the palm to the short, swarthy man called Apache Tom, whose Indian blood was apparent despite the fact that he dressed like a white man, and certainly wasn't the tall Indian they had seen.

" I'm Val Heaton, and my pardner is Bill Gentry." They had failed to see where they would be ahead any to give false names.

None of the three acknowledged the introduction by so much as a nod. Apache Tom rolled a cigarette with a dexterity that was little short of sleight-of-hand, and lighted it even as it went into his mouth.

" These boys are goin' to the ranch with us," Lije said. " I want 'em to meet Birdie."

" No more than we want to meet the lady," Val thought. Yet a woman who would subject a man to such treatment as Bull Becker had received, merely to make him tell where he had hidden his money would be no angel of mercy to a suspected enemy.

Without a word the three outlaws mounted their horses and splashed into the river. Val and Bill followed. Both had the feeling they had taken an irrevocable step which could well be fatal.

" You fellers been out around Tomkin Spring way lately ? " Lije casually threw back over his shoulder.

" Nope, we come in down the Escalante," Val answered, just as casually.

"That so? Funny yuh didn't meet my brothers yesterday. They was headin' that way. An' I thought yuh said yuh was comin' *up* the Dirty Devil lookin' fer a crossin'."

It was one of those questions which had to be incriminating either way it was answered. They had already decided it was better to take a chance on getting trapped than to admit they had come from the place where Ezra Cupples had been murdered.

"That's right," Val said. "We been clear down to the Colorado, an' was workin' our way back." He saw two of the outlaws exchange knowing glances.

They had had no opportunity to eat since the night before, but they couldn't admit this fact. By the looks of things it was going to be after dark before they reached Poison Valley. Val began to suspect they were being taken there, if at all, by a roundabout, deceiving trail.

He became sure of it when just before sundown they began to work back toward the river. It was just growing dusk when their course again altered and they headed directly away from it towards what seemed the solid wall of a timbered mesa.

"We got a good range——" Lije Satterfield was saying, when suddenly he broke off and grabbed at his shoulder. His ejaculation of pain was drowned by the roar of a rifle.

Everybody spurred madly toward the shelter afforded by the mouth of a deep arroyo, of which there were many heading from the foot of the mesa. A second bullet screamed over their heads just before they made it.

Lije Satterfield cursed wickedly. "There's yore blankety-blank crazy man—an' he come nigh 'bout gittin' me." Blood was oozing through between his fingers.

"That's him," Bill Gentry said. "The sucker stole my rifle, an' I'd know the blare o' that ole squirrel shooter anywhere."

"Git after him, you half-wits," Lije roared at his men. "He's over in that spur o' timber."

The three outlaws spurred on up the gully, but the pardners remained with Lije. They wanted no part in hunting down Bull Becker.

"Better let me tie something over that shoulder to stanch the bleedin'," Val suggested.

"No, it'll be all right till I git home—'tain't more'n half a mile," Lije refused.

In fact the shots had been heard, for somebody was shouting inquiries from up ahead, that were being answered by Jack Cradlebaugh. Within five minutes the outlaws were circling in on the place the shots had come from.

"Come on," Lije said, "they'll have routed him out by

this time, but there's no chance to ketch the damn' ole scoundrel. I wish you fellers had left him where he was."

"So do I—I'd be a rifle ahead," Bill concurred grimly.

Entirely unexpectedly they found themselves entering what seemed to be a mere split in the big mesa. A creek chuckled along through the manzanitas while towering cliffs marked the sides of the entrance. As they proceeded Val observed various barriers along the way from which riflemen could well hold an army at bay.

"I'd hate to have to fight my way into this place," Val remarked.

"It'd be just as hard to git out if you was a enemy," Lije retorted.

They were nearly to the upper end of the narrows when a red-shirted figure on a magnificent spotted horse literally took Val's breath away. It was a woman, and at sight of them she spurred her horse down off a sort of shelf where she had been waiting. Half-way down was a three-foot drop-off which the woman took in stride. Farther on was a barrier of boulders. She touched her horse, leaned ahead ever so slightly, and the animal cleared the rocks in one tremendous leap. The black-haired, loudly-dressed woman scarcely moved in the saddle. A moment later she drew rein in front of them. It was then, when he caught a glimpse of her crossed black eyes, that Val realized he was looking at the cruel queen of the Satterfield clan—Cross-eyed Birdie.

For an instant Val thought the woman was looking straight at him, but she was actually looking at her husband. Her dark cheeks flamed with anger.

"Who's doing that shooting? Who are these men? What happened to your arm?" she shot out in staccato tones.

"I jest got shot," Lije replied in a meek voice, entirely different from his previous commanding tones. "I reckon it musta been ole Bull who done it. These outlanders tuk an' turned him loose."

"They what?" Birdie's voice cracked like a whip. "You mean Bull Becker shot at you from right out here?"

"Hit me, too."

The woman placed a home-made willow whistle to her lips and blew a piercing blast. "Why ain't these strangers been disarmed?" she demanded.

"Now listen, Birdie," Lije pleaded. "These men are all right, I reckon. They let Bull out by mistake, an' he tried tuh murder them, an' rob 'em. I figger they'll be useful to us."

"Useful! Ha! We ain't turned cannibal yet, and I don't see any other use for them."

Val was still disconcerted when the woman's flashing eyes

seemed to be looking directly at him when she was addressing her husband, and vice-versa.

Two men had appeared out of the boulders, and now the three who had been with Lije were riding into the canyon. At the same time a negro appeared just above with a rifle. Birdie rode close alongside Val, and reached out a slim, brown hand for his six-gun. He knew she was looking at him, although her gaze seemed to be elsewhere. Val dropped his hand over the protruding end of the gun handle just in time to feel her hand drop upon his.

"Give me that gun," she ordered.

"I hate tuh cross a lady, ma'am, but I'm partial tuh handlin' my own weapons," Val said.

"Shoot 'em," Birdie ordered tersely.

Val let go his gun, and caught the woman's wrist with a lightning, steel-like grasp. He pulled her almost out of her saddle and held her against his breast. "No, you don't, beautiful," he laughed. "Even a bullet from behind might go plumb through us both. Instead of gittin' so warlike you'd better show us some of that hospitality your husband was bragging about."

He realized that he had never been in quite so much danger in his life. Their only hope was Lije, and that outlaw didn't care a whoop whether they lived or died. The respite could be only temporary. He would have to let her go, and when he did he and Bill would be promptly shot down.

His brain had never worked so fast. He had been around. He knew he had a way with women. He had seen them melt inexplicably at some bit of unexpected daring. They were doomed anyway, and he decided instantly to gamble their lives upon a million to one chance. He drew Birdie Satterfield hard against his body, and in the presence of her husband and the other men, crushed her lips with a long, sustained kiss!

He held her, pressing his mouth against hers harder and harder until he suddenly felt her wilt. He released her then, and laughed.

It was done. Val fully expected to be shot. He saw the frozen look of horror on Bill Gentry's face. The outlaws including Lije Satterfield were stunned by the puncher's audacity. Val tried to catch Birdie's eye, but couldn't—she was looking straight at him.

"Why, you—wait, boys, I'll have a talk with these outlanders myself. Keep an eye on them. See that there's no funny business. Apache Tom, you stay on guard and see that nobody tries anything," Birdie shot out rapidly.

"Hell, Birdie——" Lije began.

"Shut up," she told him frankly. "You come on and let

me fix up that shoulder. Jack, you bring the prisoners to me in half an hour—and without their guns."

" If you'll ask for our guns you'll git 'em," Val said. " If anybody tries to take 'em away from us they'll git the contents."

Despite the difficulty of reading Birdie's expression Val believed she was giving him reluctant admiration. It didn't stir his vanity. He knew she was as coldblooded and heartless as Bull Becker had said she was. And it was his life and Bill Gentry's as well as the unknown Ida May that he was gambling for.

" All right," Birdie agreed, " turn your guns over to Jack Cradlebaugh, will you, gentlemen ? They'll be taken care of."

" Certainly," Val said, and handed over his gun. After a moment of painful reluctance Bill Gentry handed over his.

They were detained a minute or so while Lije and Birdie rode on ahead. Apache Tom turned back the other way, and then Cradlebaugh curtly ordered the prisoners to go ahead.

Not until they were in a long bunkhouse did any of the outlaws speak.

" By Gawd, fella, kissin' Birdie was the brassiest thing I ever saw done. If you knew her or Lije either yuh'd uh let us shot yuh before yuh done that," Cradlebaugh said frankly.

" Fer once I agree with yuh," Bill Gentry put in.

" We're still alive, ain't we ? " Val demanded.

They were assigned the end of the bunkhouse farthest from the door, and all weapons were carefully removed. Cradlebaugh kept looking at his big open-faced silver watch. Precisely thirty minutes from the time he had been told he ordered them to march ahead of him to the house. They were ushered into the barbaric splendour of the big living-room. Birdie Satterfield, now in a loose-flowing pale-blue gown, sat in a huge leather upholstered chair commanding a view through the window of both the canyon and the other buildings of the ranch. She was alone.

" Get out," she told Cradlebaugh.

Val's eyebrows lifted quizzically as he watched the outlaw's exit with more haste than dignity. It needed no demonstration to show who was mistress in Poison Valley. Val would not have been surprised had she turned around and ordered him and Bill to kneel. To his surprise she waved them to chairs.

" What did you come here for ? " she asked bluntly.

" Haven't you talked with your husband, ma'am ? " Val queried.

Her lip curled with contempt. " I know what you told him," she said. " Now I want the truth."

" The truth is what we've stated. But if we'd known the

Satterfields were bossed by a woman we wouldn't have come."

"No? What do you think is wrong with the way I handle things?"

"Not a thing. Only, I can't quite understand how a woman as attractive as you could have the heart to do what you did to Bull Becker."

Suspicion and pleasure were mingled in her expression. She was obviously finding it pleasant to be flattered, yet openly suspicious of the motive.

"So you are friends of Becker's," she said.

"We never heard of the cuss," Val said exasperatedly. "We heard him yellin', naturally thought he was one of these placer miners, an' figgered tuh have a talk with him. We got a heap more information from your husband than we did from him."

"None of the Satterfields could ever keep their mouth shut," she said.

"Then you need a couple close-mouthed hombres like me an' Bill tuh help out around here," Val told her boldly.

"Don't flatter yourselves," she said. "As for close-mouthed people, old Quanney or Apache Tom don't have to brag about not talking. They just don't."

"All right. Then may I ask what you plan to do with us?" Val demanded.

"You know what I ought to do with you for what you did a while ago—or what my husband ought to do. If he hadn't been wounded you'd never have got away with it."

"It was worth the risk," he smiled, and once more there was that strange gleam in the woman's crossed eyes. She was smiling as if at some secret thought in her own mind.

"Just how would you like to spend a year or two in the place you got Becker out of?" she queried.

"Frankly, I wouldn't like it. And not likin' it I wouldn't stay there."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"I'm sure I'll never grovel to nobody—not even the queen of Poison Valley."

It was plain that Bill Gentry firmly believed every word spoken by his partner was bringing them closer to some horrendous fate. But Val was sure that only by standing up to this woman would they have a chance. After all, she was a woman, and women are curious.

"We'll see about that," she said, with an air of sudden decision. She touched the bell by her side and the Indian girl, Nancy, appeared. Birdie whispered to her, and she went out.

Something pretty savage impended. Val knew that. For an instant he was minded to seize the woman, not to kiss her

this time, but to use her as a hostage to get out of the place. It was a wild, foolish notion, and he discarded it in a moment. At best they could only get out of the valley, and he didn't know how many retainers the Satterfields had. Besides, it would practically end all hope of rescuing the girl he had come to help.

In a few minutes Jack Cradlebaugh returned and with him was Seven-up Sorensen, Rip, the negro cook, and the other two outlaws they had seen.

"Bring those handcuffs, Rip," Birdie ordered. The negro darted into another room and returned with two pairs of rusty handcuffs. Val wondered what unfortunate peace officer they had once belonged to.

For a moment he hesitated whether to submit to the handcuffs or fight it out. The latter was plainly useless. The woman had suddenly produced a six-gun from somewhere, and she held it pointed at him with a steady hand. All four of the outlaws were heavily armed, and Cradlebaugh kept Bill Gentry covered. The negro advanced and slipped on the manacles.

"All right, boys," she said, "take the old fellow out and hang him up by those handcuffs to the beef scaffold. Make sure his toes clear the floor. Make the young fellow comfortable close by, and hang lanterns where they'll shine on the old duffer's face."

"No, no!" Val cried out. "If anybody has got to be tortured let it be me. Bill didn't even want to come here. It was all my fault."

"Shut up," Bill growled. "You couldn't kept me from comin'."

"Do what I say," Birdie said, and getting up she swept grandly out of the room.

Val felt himself pinioned by the powerful negro and Seven-up Sorensen. Bill was held by the other two men. They were dragged out of the house, out to a scaffold where beef was killed. Then, while Val was compelled to watch helplessly, a rope was fastened into the handcuffs on his old partner, and Val was drawn up until all his weight was upon his wrists, and the rope had been so fixed that the steel of the handcuffs bit deep into his flesh.

Bill emitted a groan as his weight came upon his up-raised arms, but he bit his lip and endured stoically while his body turned one way as far as it could, and then swung back the other way as the rope untwisted. All the while the light from a set of lanterns beat pitilessly into his pain-racked, greying face. And Val Heaton was forced to sit there and watch.

CHAPTER VII

It was not an hour until Val Heaton was ready to eat his words. He would grovel to Birdie Satterfield or anyone else to save his old partner further misery. Old Bill was tough, but he could not endure this kind of torture many hours.

"Don't you mind me, Val—I'm kinda gittin' used to it now," Gentry said. "I'd hang here till hell freezes over before I'd weaken to that she coyote now, an' don't you weaken."

"I've got to see what she wants of us, Bill," Val said.

"You fool! Don't yuh see that if she makes us weaken we'd both have tuh suffer worse than I am now."

Handcuffed as he was Val could do nothing. He bowed his head and tried not to hear the occasional groans which were forced from his partner's lips, but the terrible fascination of that lantern light playing upon Bill's agonized face constantly drew his gaze upward. Hell could not be bad enough for a woman like Cross-eyed Birdie, he thought viciously.

Bill had been suspended for perhaps two hours when one of the Indian girls appeared like a shadow. She whispered something to Jack Cradlebaugh, and the man gave an order for two of the men to take Val back to the bunkhouse.

"Let me see Mrs. Sattersfield," he demanded.

"You keep away from that fee-male varmint," old Bill howled.

"She'll see you in the mornin'," Cradlebaugh said laconically.

Val had never before been handcuffed, and the sensation made him furious. It was all he could do to keep from struggling frantically to free himself, yet he knew it would only arouse the laughter of his jailors. He had been a fool to submit, he thought, but no man ever again would get the irons on him.

He flung himself on to a bunk. Bill was right. No matter what they had to endure they couldn't better their situation by pleading for mercy from a woman to whom that quality was unknown.

He got through the night some way. Whether his eyes were open or shut he could still see old Bill out there swinging, swinging. With the first sign of daylight he went over to a window and looked out. Bill was still hanging there, his chin upon his chest. A burst of terrible anger flowed over the puncher. Bill, he believed, was dead.

He whirled. His two guards had been taking turns watching

him all night. Something in his eyes made a fellow called "Brandy" spring to his feet and raise his gun. Gun or no gun Val would have rushed him had he not at that moment heard the sudden crack of a rifle.

He jerked around, saw Bill Gentry's head come up, and his legs kick. For an instant he thought some of them had shot his partner. But a moment later came another shot, and then people were running in every direction. He saw a white mark appear on the cross-beam of the scaffold where none had been before.

"It's Becker up on the rim!" a voice roared. "Get after him."

The man Brandy started toward the door, remembered his prisoner and turned back uncertainly.

Becker kept on shooting, and quickly a couple of rifles began to reply to him, while most of the men scurried after their horses. There was only one place from where the buildings could be successfully bombarded from the rim, and that was from close beside the entrance. Bull Becker had his nerve to attempt it, for his capture seemed certain.

The firing ceased abruptly as Becker evidently beat a retreat. Suddenly Birdie and her husband, the latter with his arm in a sling, appeared in the bunkhouse. Birdie was in her night-dress, with a man's coat over it. Lije carried a rifle, but Birdie had been using it.

"Go he'p ketch thet ole hellion, Brandy," Lije ordered. "We'uns'll take keer o' this feller."

The fellow bolted.

"Looks like your friend might have had a bad night," Birdie remarked.

Val refused to speak.

"Soon as the boys ketch old Becker we'll let your pardner down and string Bull up," the woman said.

Val got up and went toward them. There was something in his face which made Satterfield turn uneasily toward his wife. She ignored her husband and stood her ground. Val towered over her.

"You let my pardner down from there, and do it now," he said in a low, vibrating voice. His opened hands were not two feet from her shapely throat. No matter what her husband did Val knew he was strong enough to choke the life out of her before his hands would be torn away.

He couldn't read her eyes, but he saw her expression slowly change. It wasn't fear that he saw, either, but something entirely different from what he had expected.

"All right," she said softly. "Lije, get the girls to help you and cut the old man down. Carry him into the house and take care of him."

" But will you be safe, Birdie ? " Lije asked.

" I can take care of myself," she smiled.

The moment Lije was out of the bunkhouse the woman put her hand in her pocket and brought out the handcuff keys.

" You know, stranger," she said, as she unlocked the manacles, " I think you're my kind of a man. I knew last night I never could make you weaken by stringing you up there yourself, but it takes a hard man to see a friend suffer, doesn't it ? "

" Yes," Val replied, as he rubbed his chafed wrists. " I reckon I can be pretty hard. Just about a minute ago you were reachin' for a harp, whether you knew it or not."

" I read it in your eyes. You meant to let Lije kill you for the privilege of breaking my neck, didn't you ? "

" That's about it. You'd better be doin' away with me, because I'll likely break it some time if yuh don't."

Birdie laughed softly. " I like a man with some spirit," she said. " I used to think the Satterfields had some, but outside maybe of Ulysses they're just bull-headed and mean. If I hadn't been cross-eyed I might have got a man like you."

To his utter astonishment the woman was making a play for him. That daring kiss had been an inspiration after all. Whether it would be more dangerous to have her enmity than her friendship he couldn't know, but for the present he must play his cards as they fell.

" I suppose you're kidding me. A woman as attractive as you wouldn't have much trouble getting any man. Only, I don't happen to be lookin' for a woman—especially another man's wife," he said coolly.

He couldn't have made a speech that would have suited her better.

" I'm sorry we were rather mean to the old man," she said, with no appearance of sorrow. " It wasn't as bad as you thought, though. We took him down soon after you left, and we didn't string him up again until a little while ago."

" I'll believe that when I hear it from Bill."

Birdie flushed angrily. " Are you calling me a liar ? " she demanded.

" I think you'd lie if it suited your purpose."

Her temper vanished as swiftly as it had come. She looked at him quizzically. She had fought her way to the head of the outlaw clan. It had been exciting at least. There had also been limitations on what she could do, and often she was bored. Here at least promised to be a new interest, new excitement.

" I like you," she said. " If you don't get fool ideas in your head you might some day be high man in here."

"I'll think it over," he said tersely. "Now what about givin' me back my gun, an' lettin' me see Bill Gentry?"

"All right." She walked to the other end of the bunkhouse and he followed her. There was an ell on the building, and a covered passageway to the big house. She opened a chest in the first room they came to, and handed him his belt and gun.

"Just one thing," she warned. "You're free to go anywhere in Poison Valley, except this house. Nobody comes here without being asked. Remember that. I have ways of making it very unpleasant for anybody who disobeys my orders."

"I comprehend perfectly. But what about seeing my friend?"

"Wait here." She disappeared through an inner door, and Val looked around. The woman had given him permission to go any place except the house. Unless the girl called Ida May had been removed then she must be hidden somewhere in this rambling building of many rooms. As Birdie had said, it would be dangerous business seeking to search the house.

It was nearly ten minutes before Birdie returned. The man's coat, and the nightdress had disappeared, and she wore a long flowing crimson robe that might at least have belonged to a lady-in-waiting. Strange creature, Val thought. On her outlaw raids she could ride and shoot like a man. Here in her own castle she liked to simulate the life of royalty. Somehow, in spite of himself, he began to be stirred.

She had turned her profile—a trick she had apparently deliberately cultivated. Seen so she was startlingly beautiful. Even her eyes, once one became used to them, were rather attractive. They were black as coals, and covered by long silken lashes.

"I've done what I could for the old man," she said. "I'm afraid he'll have to stay in bed for a few days. You'll find him in the bunkhouse."

Val hastily retraced his steps. At the end of the passageway he found himself blocked by a locked door. He knocked and shouted but got no reply. No one opened the door. He suppressed an urge to kick the door down and returned to the room at the other end, half-expecting to find that locked also. It wasn't. Birdie looked up and smiled when he entered.

"That," she informed lightly, "is a private door. There are only two keys—and I have them both. This way out."

She led the way into the big ornate living-room, and nodded towards the outer door. "Why don't you have a secret passage?" he sneered.

"How do you know I haven't?" she retorted. "Some day you may find out."

He hurried across the yard to the bunkhouse. Bill Gentry was alone there. The old man was groaning softly, but at Val's entrance he ceased.

" How are you, Bill ? " Val asked anxiously.

" Fit as a fiddle—except I ain't got no use o' my danged arms. I reckon they're plumb sprained."

Bill's cut, bruised and swollen wrists were now neatly bandaged.

" Bill, did they keep you strung up all night ? "

" Naw, I reckon I'd been daid if they had. They didn't keep me long after you left, but it shore hurt like hell when they stretched me up again this mawnin'."

" If ever I see a fiend that woman's it," Val gritted.

" I was afeared they'd do wuss tuh you when they took you away."

" They never harmed me at all. I still can't see what her game was in stringin' you up."

" I know one reason," Bill said. " It was so yore Idy May could see me."

" What ? "

" Right soon after they tuk you away I heard somebody comin' up behind me. I couldn't turn, o' co'se, but I heard some gal give a squeal, an' then a hand was clapped over her mouth. Atter that I heered somebody bein' dragged away."

" Then Ida May is here, an' I'm ready to bet she's bein' held inside that house," Val declared.

" Which leaves us whar ? "

" I dunno. But I've to git in touch with her someway, an' then figger a way tuh git out."

" If yuh git a chance don't pay no 'tention tuh me, fer I won't be no good till my sprained shoulders heal up."

" Like hell ! I let 'em do this to you because I couldn't help it, but I'm not leavin' you."

" You better git away 'fore the rest o' the Satterfields git back. I heerd 'em say there'd be a bunch o' 'em along in a little while."

" It wouid be a good idea, but I'm not leavin' without you or the girl. At least I intend to talk to her."

Several hours later the outlaws returned without Bull Becker. Val heard Birdie Satterfield cursing them for not having found the old man.

Val wandered about the place without being molested, although he was careful to keep in sight at all times. He was a little bit shocked to discover the other two women. The older Mrs. Satterfield stared at him, a corn-cob pipe gripped firmly between her toothless gums. There was something fierce and untamed in her faded old eyes which made him shudder and turn away quickly.

Delly looked at him curiously, and went on with her work. A dirty-faced urchin clung to her skirt and stared.

" You have a nice garden, ma'am," Val ventured.

" 'Twould be if thar was ary one here t' hope me with it once in a while," the woman answered.

" Maybe I could—as long as I'm not doin' anything else," he offered.

" I reckon thet wouldn't be fitten. The rest would laugh at ye," Delly said.

" But surely you didn't do all this work alone ? "

" No, Idy May——" The woman broke off abruptly. She pretended to scold one of her children, but Val saw that she was confused.

" Ah reckon you'd better go on 'bout yore business, mister," she said shortly.

" Idy May," Val repeated. " That must be someone I ain't seen."

" You better not, mister," Delly warned. " She's promised tuh Clay, an' the Satterfield's are mighty jealous men."

" It's funny I ain't seen her, though," Val persisted.

Delly wiped her hands upon her skirt. " Mister, if yuh wanta keep on livin' here—keep on livin'—don't try tuh see the things ye ain't intended tuh see," she said, and stubbornly resumed her work. He knew that she wouldn't speak again.

The situation was clear. This girl, Ida May, was being imprisoned somewhere to compel her to marry Clay Satterfield. Undoubtedly she had been brought out the night before to see Bill Gentry being tortured as a warning of what might happen to her if she remained obdurate.

Find the girl, and get her and Bill Gentry out of there before the rest of the Satterfields returned ! That was Val's job. It seemed an impossible one. He knew that he was being watched every moment. There were five able-bodied men in there beside Lije Satterfield. And there was Birdie herself more dangerous than half a dozen men and the two Indian girls. He was soon to find out there was still another man.

Coming from the corral he rounded the corner of a stable and confronted a tall Indian of perhaps fifty with a seamed and wrinkled face. The Indian was planted directly in the path and he didn't move. Val stopped and they looked each other over in silence. Val stood over six feet, but the Indian towered above him by inches. His long black hair hung down his back in two long braids and was fastened with silver clips.

" How *hointz*," Val said.

The red man only grunted.

Val looked down at the Indian's moccasins. " Make-um

big track in mud," he grinned. "Mebbeso me see-um before, huh?"

"Me Quanney," the Indian said, drawing himself up to his full height and folding his arms.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Val said and stepping around the man went on to the bunkhouse.

"Golly, I was beginnin' tuh think yuh' got into some trouble," Bill said relieved. "Find out anything?"

"I found out I got a tough job on my hands."

When the supper bell rang Bill started to get up, but Val restrained him. "Hell, I kin walk an' feed myself," Bill swore.

"Don't recover too damn' quick. You're plenty sick as it is, but the more helpless you pretend tuh be the better chance we'll have to make a gitaway if we have to. I'll bring your grub, an' feed yuh like a baby."

Bill snorted, but relaxed.

The outlaws lived well. Birdie sat at the head of the table, this time wearing a low-cut satin dress. Her bare arms glittered with bracelets, and her fingers were heavy with rings. Val wondered if she was trying to impress him. She ate little, most of the time smoking one cigarette after another, and drinking black coffee. Her remarks were directed at Val, as she questioned him about the cities in the west where he had been.

"I think I'll take a little trip out to the coast soon," she said. "I always wanted to see San Francisco."

"Wanta git picked up?" her husband asked irritably.

"I think I'd be safe enough, don't you, Mr. Heaton?"

"I think you're clever enough to be safe anywhere," Val returned gallantly.

"Thanks. A Satterfield couldn't say a nice thing like that. All they can do is grumble and swear."

"That's not quite all we kin do," Lije said, with a menacing scowl. "We know how ter pertect our wimmin—from ary danger." His tone was a flat warning to Val. He wasn't trying to conceal his displeasure.

When the meal was finished Val started to get up. He had previously asked to have a tray prepared for Gentry.

"Don't be in a hurry," Birdie commanded. "Nancy," tell Rip to take that tray out, and feed the old man if it's necessary. You don't need to stay, Lije."

Satterfield got up reluctantly and went out.

"Be sure you tell the guards to stay awake," she called after him. "We don't want Bull Becker sneaking in here."

"You're going to get your husband down on me," Val protested.

"Afraid of him, are you?"

"I wouldn't say that, but I understand the Satterfields do stick together."

"It's too bad Lije got wounded," she laughed. "Maybe I could make you two fight a duel over me."

"Not me, lady," Val smiled, and stood up. "I know how these Southerners feel about their womenfolk, an' you're not lurin' me into any battles. Good-night.

Birdie was smiling as she watched him leave. She craved constant excitement. All her life she had wanted the admiration of men. Her physical defect had frustrated her dreams in her girlhood, and she had married Lije Satterfield because there had been no one else with the courage to marry her. But she knew that in spite of her eyes she was attractive, and this handsome young stranger had admitted she was alluring.

She wasn't quite sure yet how she wanted to use him. She had money. The two of them might go away somewhere. But she had come to love the excitement of outlawry, and the imitation of royalty which nowhere else could she indulge. If she could get rid of the Satterfields they might continue to live on in Poison Valley.

At the very worst she would have the fun of watching him fight to the death over her. The prospect was thrilling.

It was not quite midnight when Val Heaton slid quietly out of bed, buckled on his gun, and picked up his boots. He could hear the snoring of Cradlebaugh and Sorensen, and he knew Brandy and Bug-eye, the other two white outlaws, were on guard at the narrow gateway.

He tiptoed softly to the door. The only other door, he knew, was locked. He hesitated a moment, saw that the coast was clear and stepped outside. The men inside were still snoring.

At the end of the bunkhouse he buckled on his gun and got into his boots. Making a wide circle he approached the house from the opposite side. There was not a single door or window on either the north or west sides, but he had earlier noticed there were loopholes all along the buildings, just higher than a man's head.

There was close to twenty rooms, he judged, in that rambling structure. He had no way of knowing which was occupied and which unoccupied. A sort of veranda ran the entire length on the east and south, and there seemed to be doors opening into each room. Yet there were several off-shoots which implied that there might be rooms inside with no windows at all.

He went clear along the solid side of the building and stopped at the extreme south end of the veranda. He stopped and listened. There was not a sound save the dull hum of

insects, and the occasional noise of the animals in the barn.

Once more he removed his boots and carried them in his hand as he stepped upon the veranda. He tried the first door he came to. It was locked. He moved on; tried two other doors. There was no question that all of them were locked. He couldn't break them open by force without arousing everybody. Remained only the windows. Surely, on a night like this, every one would be sleeping with an open window—except, perhaps, the imprisoned girl he wanted to see. He must avoid the open windows—try to find a closed one. All of the windows at this end appeared to be shut.

He stepped over to a window and pushed upward. It resisted. He tried again and made sure that it was fastened by an inner catch.

A slight noise made him whirl, and his hand flew to his gun. Twenty feet away stood the tall figure of Quanney. His arms were folded upon his breast.

CHAPTER VIII

VAL'S HAND touched the handle of his gun, lifted it half out of the holster, and let it fall again as the Indian didn't move. Then, a door opened.

Val felt a cold creepy feeling along his spine. His hand remained upon his gun. He knew who had opened that door. It was Birdie. If her husband followed her outside the showdown would have to come. He would fight. He would get Satterfield and the Indian—if he could—and seize the woman. What happened next he didn't know, but Birdie would show him the girl, Ida May, or get her slender neck broken.

But Lije Satterfield didn't appear. Instead, the woman closed the door gently behind her and came along the veranda on noiseless feet.

"You may go, Quanney," she said, and the tall Indian drifted noiselessly out of sight.

She placed a hand upon Val's arm, led him into a dark corner where one of the rooms jutted out from the others.

"One word from me, and you would be dead now, my friend," she stated evenly.

"I notice you didn't speak that word," he retorted.

"It's not too late. So far as that goes I'm a dead shot myself." She showed him that she carried a revolver in the folds of her robe.

The cold feeling of dread had gone. He was almost enjoying the situation, dangerous as he knew it to be. He

almost hoped that the woman's husband would appear. It might be the best opportunity he would ever have to rescue the girl and fight their way outside.

"Why were you trying to break into my house?"

"Because you were so careful to tell me how difficult it would be," he laughed softly.

"I wonder. Hoped to find a lot of money and sneak away, eh?"

"No; frankly I figger I could make a lot more to stay here and throw in with you. You and me together could make this a real outlaw gang. You want to know what I was really looking for?"

"I mean to know, if I have to summon my men and get it out of you with a mule-whip," she replied.

"You'd be a great success if you only had a little more restraint," he smiled. "It's funny how women, when they do fall out with society, always think they must go the whole hog. Cruelty and violence ain't the right way to find out things."

"No? How would you do it?"

"Take Bull Becker, for instance: if you'd treated Bull nice he'd have told you long ago where his money was, instead of bein' a threat to your life. You know, don't you, that Bull's one purpose now is to kill you?"

He saw her shiver a little. "You said you'd tell me what you were looking for," she reminded.

"I was looking for the girl that Bill Gentry says you brought out last night to watch him being tortured."

Her gun came up, was pressed hard against his body. "I ought to shoot you," she got out furiously. "So you're a dirty lawman sent in here to find out what had become of that girl. The Satterfields will fix you."

Again Val laughed. "So there is a girl," he said. "Until now I thought mebbe Bill was out of his head. What are you hidin' her for?"

He almost vented an explosive breath of relief when she removed the gun from his body. She was certainly dynamite, and it would require but little teasing to make her explode.

"You're either a complete fool, or a very brave man, Heaton," she said. "I wonder which."

"Come on now, why don't you let me see this girl and satisfy my curiosity," he smiled, playing up to her characterization.

"You get to hell back to the bunkhouse and stay there," she said, shortly. "I'll tell Quanney to stick a knife in your back if he sees you prowling again. He could have done it half a dozen times to-night.

"I doubt it," Val bragged.

"Are you disobeying my orders?" she asked, and her tone

had gone flat and dead. Val realized that he had played his strings in that direction to the extreme limit.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he answered. "Good-night, Mrs. Satterfield." He started to go.

"Wait!" she ordered. "To-morrow there'll be a band of twenty or more young renegade Indians who take orders from Quanney outside hunting down old Bull Becker. They'll get him, too. Would you like to see the fun?"

"Why not?"

"All right, cowbody, we'll ride together—with Quanney close behind." She stood facing him. In the starlight her crossed eyes didn't show. She looked slender and beautiful—almost like an innocent young girl. Her face was upturned slightly, and he had a feeling that she was daring him to kiss her again. How a person who appeared as she did then could be such a cold-blooded fiend was hard to understand.

"Good-night," he said again, and returned to the bunkhouse.

"Well?" Bill whispered when he was in bed again.

"No dice." Val turned over on his side and went to sleep.

The sun was scarcely up before Val rode out of the valley beside Birdie Satterfield. Lije had not been to breakfast. His wound was feverish, and he was bed-ridden for the time being. Val heard Birdie instruct the Indian girls, Nancy and Jewell, how to take care of him.

Quanney, mounted on a small but tough-looking pony, rode a short distance behind them. Once outside the valley they began to climb toward the rim of the mesa above them along a steep and timbered trail.

"It might be dangerous for you if Becker happened to see you," Val suggested.

"Your eyesight is poor," she said. "Two of Quanney's boys are right ahead of us."

Val didn't want to talk. He was worried lest Bull Becker be caught. What would happen to him would not be a pretty thing to see.

They emerged on top of a broad timbered plain whose surface was marred by unexpected canyons and occasional rising cliffs. Before long Val noticed that Quanney had disappeared, and he no longer caught glimpses of the ragged Indian youths ahead. There were numerous bunches of wild cattle, and he realized that this was the summer range of the Satterfields.

Birdie drew rein at the foot of an uprising cliff and dismounted. "We'll let our horses graze for a while and have lunch," she said.

"What about Quanney—don't he eat?"

"Quanney takes orders from me—not my husband," she explained succinctly.

As they ate the very good lunch Rip had prepared she tried to draw him out about his past. He was evasive. He volunteered only, and as casually as he could, that he and Bill Gentry had met while doing time in a penitentiary.

"Lije and Frost did some time in a penitentiary once," she commented.

They remained there for over two hours. Val was never sure whether Quanney was around or not. Their horses, with reins dragging, had grazed out of sight around the cliff. For a moment Val struggled with a great temptation. He could seize this outlaw queen, tie her up somewhere, and force the outlaws to turn over Ida May and Bill Gentry for her release.

It was too desperate an expedient to try—yet.

"I'll get the horses," he offered curtly.

He had expected her to go with him. She did not. The horses were farther away than he had thought. As he returned he caught the sound of angry voices. He leaped from the saddle, and scurried up the cliff to where he could see. Birdie had been joined by Jack Cradlebaugh, and they were not fifty feet from him.

"You *dare* to question anything I do?" the woman cried angrily. "I've a notion to call Quanney and have you turned over to his warriors. They'd enjoy having a white man to torture."

"I reckon you could later, but I happen tuh know yuh sent Quanney away," the outlaw went on doggedly.

"So you disobeyed orders and followed me? Spied on me."

"I've told you why. You know I'm crazy about you, Birdie. Ole Lije ain't no man fer yuh, an' we both know it. But I don't like this stranger hangin' around yuh. I'm gonna put a slug in him."

Queenly anger darkened Birdie Satterfield's face. "Why, you two-for-a-nickel jailbird," she grated harshly, "you dare to make love to me? For a cent I'd shoot you in your tracks. Whatever gave you the idea I cared anything for you?"

"You did," the man said sullenly. "Yuh've allus treated me nicer than the rest of 'em, an' I've done more fer yuh."

"I see it doesn't pay to treat stray curs with too much kindness," she replied bitterly. "As for this other man I'm petting him along to find out what he's really up to."

"If yuh need any help——"

"I won't call on you. But if you don't get out of here I'll ask him to take care of you, and I think he's man enough to do it."

"If I tell Lije——"

"Tell him," Birdie said. "Maybe you want to find out who the real boss of this outfit is."

"I'm sorry, Birdie. I—I jest got jealous." He swung on to his horse and started to leave.

Val saw a cruel look pass over the woman's face. "Wait," she called. "I want you here when Heaton comes back."

Val slid quietly back to the horses, and stood for a moment thinking. This unpredictable woman had something up her sleeve. He didn't know what it was, but it would pay to be ready for anything when around her.

She was backed up against the cliff when he rounded the turn. "You wouldn't dare!" she screamed suddenly.

A blank look swept over Cradlebaugh's face, but before he could close his astonished mouth to speak she was screaming words at Val. "Val, this dirty rattlesnake has been following us. If you don't kill him he'll tell my husband a lot of lies, and we'll both be ruined."

Val's astonishment was only a degree less than Cradlebaugh's, but the latter knew Birdie better, and realized that she wanted to get him killed, or at least to satisfy her mania for violence and bloodshed. Val saw Cradlebaugh's gun sweeping out of the holster, and there was a look of desperation upon the man's face.

Val drove in the spurs and leaned sideways as he went for his gun. Cradlebaugh's weapon sounded, and Val heard the crackle of the bullet as it barely missed his side. He fired, and Cradlebaugh's horse dropped in its tracks. It had a white face—a fine target—and Val had chosen to kill the horse rather than the rider. The horse didn't even fall sideways for a second after it went down. Cradlebaugh was left standing stride the animal, his feet still in the stirrups, an amazed look on his face.

"Drop it," Val burred. The outlaw let the gun fall and freed his feet an instant before his mount toppled over on its side.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Birdie shrieked. "If you're too yellow to do it I'm not." She raised her gun, and the next second stood rubbing her numbed arm, and looking blankly at the gun which Val had shot out of her hand.

"Why, you——"

"Shut up!" Val told her. "I happened to overhear your little talk a minute ago, and killin' a man just because you like to see blood flow don't appeal to me." He swung down, and picked up both guns. He handed Cradlebaugh his weapon and said, "Git goin'."

The outlaw looked at his dead horse, then suddenly jammed his gun into the holster and made tracks.

Val watched the man out of sight. Then he deliberately emptied the woman's gun and handed it smilingly back to her. "That was a dirty trick you tried to play on me an' Jack," he said. "I never saw such a woman. Shall we go now?"

She studied him a moment in silence. "So you listened, did you? Better men have been killed for less."

"If I stick around here there's going to be a little less promiscuous killing. Some day somebody is going to break that pretty little neck of yours."

She came toward him, fingered his lapel. Her face was upturned to his, although her eyes seemed to be looking off into space. He glanced hastily at her hands—to see if she'd got hold of a dagger somewhere.

"You kissed me the other day," she said softly. "Didn't you like it?"

He knew what she wanted, and it would be the poorest kind of policy to refuse. He put his arms around her, and gave her one long, breath-taking kiss that he hoped would satisfy her for the time being. It did.

They got on their horses, and rode toward a high pinnacle some four miles away. When they stopped, the tall, and from that distance, majestic figure of Quanney appeared three hundred yards above them. He made a signal which Val interpreted to mean that nothing had happened.

"If his lads capture Bull Becker they'll send up a smoke signal which Quanney will see, and then he'll signal to the rest from here," Birdie explained. "I can't see why they haven't caught that old buzzard yet."

She insisted that they wait until dark, and then turned reluctantly homeward. Her romantic mood, to Val's relief, was gone. She seemed moody and depressed. The trail down was a rough one, but she rode with superlative ease and grace. Once Val complimented her upon her skill.

"A lot of these fool Westerners like to imagine they're the only people who know how to ride," she sneered. "I was following the hounds back home when I was six years old."

They were challenged sharply at the entrance to the valley by Bug-eye. "It's Birdie, Captain," the woman said, and started to ride by.

"Can I speak to you?" the sentinel asked.

She rode over to him, and Val saw her give a start at the man's information. They talked a couple of minutes and she rode back to where Val waited.

"There's no telling what you may be riding into," she said quietly. "The Satterfield's are back, and Frost and Clay aren't like my husband. You never can tell what they may do."

CHAPTER IX

FOUR MEN were standing close to the corral when Val and Birdie rode up. There was moon enough for Val to recognize Lije Satterfield and Jack Cradlebaugh. The two strangers were plainly Frost and Clay Satterfield. They were as tall as their brother Lije but heavier.

Birdie stopped in front of them, and Val drew his mount to a halt just a little farther back.

"Hello, Birdie," the older of the newcomers greeted. "Looked like you'd been gittin' some ree-cruits since we left."

"That's right, Frost. How come you boys back so soon?"

"We jest decided Ulas could han'le it, an' Clay was anxious tuh git back. I reckon you know why."

"Yes. They told yuh about Bull Becker, I reckon."

"Shore. An' I k'ain't see why yo're coddlin' the men who let him loose 'stead o' shottin' 'em. They're members o' ole Bull's gang," Frost said heavily.

"You're crazy," Birdie said. "I know what I'm doing. These men are all right, and we need some *good* men. Bull Becker's got away, an' we'll have a fight on when he gathers his old gang."

"An' have two of 'em already here in the valley," Clay spoke for the first time. His voice was harsh and surly. Val glanced at him critically. He was the one the girl Ida May was supposed to marry; and he was much the most unlovely one of the lot.

"I say that yo're a liar," Val spoke suddenly.

"Huh? Nobody calls me a liar!" Clay bellowed.

"Be still," Birdie cried loudly. Her empty gun appeared in her hand. "You try anything, Clay, and I'll shoot you like a dog," she went on contemptuously. "You, Val, keep your beak out of this."

It was this kind of arrogance which had established her authority. The three Satterfields looked sullen, but they offered no direct opposition.

"If you want to fist fight go ahead, but I'll have no gunplay in here," she went on. "I'm vouching for Heaton and Gentry, and that's enough. Put these horses up, Val, and we'll have supper. How's your shoulder, Lije?"

"It's hurtin' like hell. I wouldn't uh got outa bed iffen the boys hadn't come. An' yo're wrong about Becker leavin' the country. He shot Jack's horse from under him. Them Injuns is blind. Or else Jack lied."

"He lied. You told him to spy on me, so I shot his horse

out from under him. Next time I'll shoot him," Birdie said. She swung to the ground, tossed her reins to Val and walked toward the house.

The three Satterfields watched her a moment, then slowly followed her to the house. Jack Cradlebaugh slowly followed Val toward the barn.

"You're a good shot, stranger," he said in a low voice. "I reckon I kin thank yuh for bein' alive now."

"You was kinda sudden yoreself," Val said.

"I figgered I hadda be. That damn' woman. She does things to a man. She's meaner'n snake pizen, yet she gits a holt on yuh some way. She tried tuh git one of us kilt, yit I'll go an' do anything she wants me to. But you'd better look out. Ole Lije is kinda discouraged an' has lost his pride, but not the others. They'll kill any man they thought was shinin' up tuh Birdie."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll try to keep away from her. By the way, I understand there's another girl in here. Why are they keepin' her out of sight?" Val asked boldly.

"Mister, that's somethin' you'd better not mess with," Cradlebaugh advised curtly.

Val returned to the bunkhouse to wait a call for supper. Cradlebaugh, Apache Tom, and Seven-up Sorensen drifted in later, and started a card game.

Presently Rip knocked timidly on the door and came in with a tray of food.

"Miss Birdie tell me fetch this to you," he told Val.

The puncher ate with a good appetite. Quanney was nowhere about, and he wondered if he could make another effort to find the girl. But there was no telling when the tall Ute might appear.

"Them Satterfields had me on the pan fer an hour before you come," Bill said. "Mighty mean, them fellers, mighty mean."

In the end Val gave up the idea of another midnight sortie. Now that Clay was back things were likely to happen, and it would be better to wait.

Val was up early the next morning, and the yard was full of dirty, ragged young Indians. By this time he had gathered that Quanney's band was composed of young cut-throats who had fled from their reservations to indulge in whatever kind of deviltry came their way. They were a wild, uncouth, and thoroughly barbaric lot. He hadn't been up ten minutes before he discovered that the two Indian girls, Nancy and Jewell, were frightened to death of them.

When the breakfast gong sounded he filed into the dining-room with the rest of the men. Birdie was in her place at the head of the table, but on her right sat a golden-haired girl

who brought Val up with a sudden jerk. The puncher had never seen a sweeter, or a more tragic face.

The girl was not eating, but her eyes were fastened upon her plate, and she didn't look up as the men entered. On the other side of her sat Clay Satterfield, a vulture's grin on his sloppy, loose-lipped mouth as he whispered something into the girl's ear. Lije was not present, but his place was occupied by grim, forbidding Frost Satterfield.

Birdie was toying idly with her fork. She smiled quizzically, and Val had learned enough about her to know that she was smiling at him, although she appeared to be looking elsewhere.

"Oh, Ida May," she said with unctuous sweetness, "here is a new man you haven't met yet. His name is Val Heaton."

The girl looked up quickly; turned large frightened eyes, whose colour Val couldn't determine, upon him. They were a dark shade of blue he had never seen before. It seemed to him that those eyes flashed a desperate appeal for help. She didn't rise nor speak.

"How do you do, Miss Ida May," Val bowed.

She gave a barely perceptible nod, but Clay stared angrily at the puncher.

"You know, Val," Birdie went on, "you're just in time to see our pretty little Ida May married. She and Clay are getting married this afternoon."

Frost, Apache Tom, and the others grinned.

"Is that so? How does it happen, Miss Ida May, that I ain't seen you around before?"

"Because nobody wanted you tuh see her, fella," Clay replied. "An' I'm warnin' you an' the rest o' these birds—I don't want none o' yuh even lookin' at my wife, let alone speakin' tuh her."

"Not such a nice prospect for your wife, is it?" Val had to say.

Clay Satterfield got up. He pushed back his chair. "Nobody gits fresh with me around here," he said. "Birdie don't want you shot, but I'm goin' tuh knock yuh down an' tromple the guts plumb outa yuh. Come outside."

Val saw Ida May shake her head vigorously, imploring him to make his peace. Birdie still smiled cynically.

"Wait!" she called out sharply. "Fight if you want to, but I'll not have you keeping breakfast waiting. Eat your breakfast and fight afterward. Jewell, set on the food."

The men hesitated, but as Birdie's dreadful eyes played over them they suddenly slumped into their seats, and fell to eating.

Clay Satterfield was a beast, and he had a beast's appetite. He began to ladle food into himself with both hands, and his brother Frost ate only a little less voraciously. Val drank a

couple of cups of coffee, but made little more than a pretence of eating. The more his foe ate the better he liked it. Birdie rested her chin upon her hand, and he guessed that she was watching him. It occurred to him that she might have postponed the fight to give him a better chance. She despised the Satterfields, he was sure. But why, then, was she forcing an innocent girl to marry one of them.

"What's the matter, fella—too scared tuh eat?" Clay taunted once.

"I just don't happen to be hungry," Val replied.

"What's the matter with you, Idy May; ain't eatin' no more'n a bird?" Clay said.

"Please don't fight," the girl spoke for the first time. Her voice was low and musical.

"Aw, don't worry about me. I could lick a han'ful like thet tenderfoot," the fellow boasted.

Val was the last man to arise from the table. He was glad this fight was coming. He knew nothing of the details of the proposed wedding, but he knew that he must avert it some way at any cost, and the only way he could think of now was to make the bridegroom unfit to go through the ceremony.

He knew it would be a bloody, vicious encounter. Fairness was not in the make-up of the Satterfields. He knew only too well what would probably happen to him if ever he went down. Birdie was the only person who could help him—and she was not likely to.

The Indians were eating out close to the corral, but they left off to join the circle that formed about the two combatants.

"Look out fer a knife," Jack Cradlebaugh whispered as Val passed him. "If yuh need mine——"

Val dared not pause, but he was not unmindful.

Satterfield had stripped. His brown body looked unwashed. He was big and muscular, but he was paunchy for a young man, and he looked muscle-bound. One look at him and Val knew that his play was to keep away. In a clinch the outlaw would be unbeatable. And after the big breakfast his foe had eaten he knew where to concentrate his attack.

"Go git him, Clay," Frost yelled, and the battle was on.

Val moved with the speed of a panther. His fist jarred against his enemy's chin. He ducked under Clay's swinging blow, and drove both fists into the fellow's stomach.

He was amazed to see the fellow go down, rolling in agony.

"Git up an' fight, you yeller dog," he snarled.

"Why, damn yore soul, you k'ain't do thet tuh my brother," Frost yelled, and Val turned in time to see the man charging him with an open knife. He evaded the man's first murderous lunge. Circled. He could see the avid looks upon the faces

of the Indians and outlaws. They wanted to see blood spilled. His blood.

Frost, crouching, came after him. The man leaped and his knife flashed wickedly. Val tried to catch the arm, missed. Then Frost seized his shirt with the other hand and jerked Val into him where he could work with the deadly knife.

"Gut him !!" Val heard Apache Tom yell inelegantly.

Val's fist churned against the fellow's chin. Frost's jaws clicked as he staggered back, but Val felt a stabbing pain along his breast. Val tore loose, leaving part of his shirt in his adversary's hands. As he stepped backward he suddenly felt the handle of a knife stuck into his palm.

He knew Jack Cradlebaugh had taken a long chance in slipping him the weapon, but unless he was to be mercilessly slaughtered he had to have it. And he could see clay Satterfield now getting to his feet.

He sprang back into the middle of the circle, displaying the knife. "Come on, Satterfield, I can use one of your ears," he jeered.

Frost, seeing the knife, appeared to stop in mid-áir. Val, with twice the speed of the outlaw, leaped. He could have disembowelled the fellow had he wanted to. He caught Frost's knife hand, plunged his blade through the lobe of Frost's left ear and left the man neatly earmarked. Frost yelled, and clapped his hand to his ear. In an instant the point of Cradlebaugh's knife was pressed against his heart.

"Stand back !" came the shrill, excited voice of Birdie, and the outlaws who had been about to interfere stopped abruptly. Frost's eyes rolled wildly.

"Drop that knife," Val ground out, and the weapon clattered to the ground.

Val stepped back.

"You cowards," Birdie cried. "I thought you Satterfields claimed to be fighting men." She was panting from excitement.

"Wait !" she cried, as several men started forward. "You challenged him to a fight. That meant it was to be fair. Clay, have you got enough ?"

"No by Gawd. He tuk me by surprise. Iffen he'll throw away that knife I'll bust the airth open with him."

"You got a knife of your own. Why don't you get it out and fight him ?" the woman said. "Maybe you'll have better luck than Frost."

The young outlaw hesitated. "I want no knife fightin'," he said finally.

"Then put away your knives and fight fair," Birdie ordered. "Take yours out of your pocket."

Reluctantly the bully took out his knife—it was already

open—and placed it in the outstretched hand of the woman. She reached for the knife in Val's hand, and he gave it to her.

"The rest of you keep out of it," she ordered fiercely.

Val smiled grimly as Clay cautiously renewed the battle. He had all the advantage now. He didn't have to be on guard against treachery, and his man was already weakened. He forced Clay to lead. He landed a few light lefts to his enemy's face, then saw his opportunity and stepped in with a terrific right to the breadbasket. Clay groaned and took it. The fellow rushed in wildly, knowing now that his only chance was to clinch. Val fought him away. His left hand seemed always in his foe's face. Blood trickled from Clay's nose and mouth. And again and again Val found the fellow's stomach with his right.

The fight couldn't go on. The outlaws were now as silent as the Indians. Clay Satterfield was taking a terrific whipping. Only Birdie prevented the rest from taking a hand. But Val wasn't done yet. If possible he wanted to hurt this man so badly that he couldn't go through any mock marriage ceremony this day.

He saw his foe prepare for a final attempt to clinch. Changing his tactics suddenly he grabbed Clay's outstretched arm with both hands, whirled under it, twisting it almost loose from the shoulder, got the arm across his own shoulder and heaved. It was done almost too rapidly for the others to follow. Clay's feet flew high into the air as he soared over the puncher's head and came down upon the hard ground with a terrific thump. The fellow's head banged against the earth and he lay still.

Val walked through the crowd to get his gun. Nobody tried to stop him.

"Well, Elder Sorensen, it don't look like yuh'd be marryin' Clay tuh anybody to-day," he heard someone mutter.

He saw the crowd being dispersed by Birdie as he entered the bunkhouse. The negro cook, Rip, stepped aside to let him pass.

"Lord, I thought they was murderin' yuh," Bill Gentry said. "I couldn't git a-past that blamed nigger tuh he'p yuh."

"Good thing you couldn't," Val said. He examined the cut on his chest while he told Bill briefly about the fight. The wound was not serious.

"How come 'em tuh let you beat up their leaders is shore more'n I kin understand," Bill declared.

Val didn't care to tell him that it was because Cross-eyed Birdie had taken a fancy to him. Anyway, he knew that any little whim might cause her to turn against him.

"I saw the girl, Bill," he said. "She was booked to be

married to this cuss Clay to-day, but if he goes through a ceremony now I'll bet he does it flat on his back."

"If she does marry this Satterfield, then the best thing we kin do is to make tracks," Bill said. "I never did like the idee o' foolin' with another man's wife."

Val winced, but he said doggedly, "Marriage or no marriage I'm goin' to have a talk with Ida May, and if she wants to leave she goes with us."

He was wondering how he was going to get to have a talk with her when the dinner gong suddenly began to ring. He and Bill stiffened. That bell was surely an alarm of some kind.

After a moment he stepped to the door. White men and Indians alike were converging toward the house. He went along. Birdie was standing on the verandah. Val had never seen such a look of fury on a human face.

"Ida May has disappeared," she cried. "Drop everything you're doing, all of you, and find her."

CHAPTER X

THE ONLY PERSON Ida May had been permitted to see since her refusal to marry Clay had been the Indian girl, Jewell, who silently brought her food, and as silently went away. There was no window in the little dark room where she was kept; only a porthole that provided some amount of fresh air.

The horrible threat Birdie had made to give her to Quanney's young Indians was ever in the girl's mind. She had always been afraid of Indians, and the mere sight of Quanney, who had visited Poison Valley for years, had always caused her to hide. Much as she hated and despised Clay Satterfield marriage would be better than being given to the Indians. By this time she knew Birdie well enough to know that she could expect no mercy from her. Birdie had always hated her, and she knew that if she did marry Clay she would lead a life of slavery exactly as Delly was forced to do.

She had been taken out of her room just once; that was to be shown the grotesque, swinging form of a grey-headed stranger who was being strung up by the wrists. One horrified glance was all that Ida May was able to bear.

"You see," Birdie said when she was brought back, "I'm fully capable of making folks suffer who don't do as I say. When Clay comes back you'll marry him, or Quanney takes you away."

Until Clay actually returned she would make no promises. Then she learned that he was back ahead of time when Birdie came to her room.

"Clay is here, and Quanney and his bucks are here," the woman said without preamble. "To-morrow you take your choice. Seven-up Sorensen was a Mormon elder once, and he can marry you."

"Birdie," the girl pleaded, "what did I ever do to you? You've hated me ever since you've been here. Why don't you help me get away. I'll never bother you."

"No? We're outlaws. Plumb notorious outlaws. Once you got away you'd talk your head off. You'd tell 'em all about us, how we work and everything. Oh, no, I mean to fix you so you'll stay here and behave yourself like Delly does, or you'll never talk to anybody."

"But why don't you and Lije go somewhere and live like decent people. You've got money enough."

Birdie laughed bitterly. "I've tried living like decent people. I was decent. Too damned decent. I was laughed at all my life because I was cross-eyed. Even if a man liked me he didn't dare let on for fear his friends would say he couldn't get anything but a cross-eyed girl. But here I'm somebody. I'm queen. Nobody dares to cross me no matter what they think. And I'm not giving it up."

"But now that you are married it would be different."

"Married! To what? An ignorant hill-billy who couldn't keep out of trouble if he wanted to. I'm staying right here, and I'm making myself safe. And the sooner Clay breaks your spirit like Frost did Delly's the better I'll like it. They've got to realize that there's only one woman around here that counts and that's me."

"You are heartless," the girl sobbed.

"You just bet I am," Birdie said grimly. "I had twenty years of hell in my life, and now I enjoy seeing other people suffer, do you hear? If I did what I really wanted to do I'd let Quanney have you. Now which is it to be—Clay or Quanney?"

"Oh, I'll marry Clay," Ida May moaned. "It doesn't matter what becomes of me."

"That's the first sensible thing I've heard you say," Birdie declared. "You can come to breakfast in the morning with the rest of us."

Ida May had forced herself to accept Clay's rough kiss when they met the next morning, although she could not restrain a shudder. Of all the Satterfields she liked him least. Even the brutal Frost had more kindness than he.

She had paid little attention to the stranger, supposing him merely another outlaw, until the sudden quarrel had sprung up. Whoever he was she felt that he was doomed if he fought with Clay. She was sorry for him, but she knew how useless it would be to voice a protest.

Then, quite suddenly in the excitement after the fight began, she found herself alone. For the first time since her unfortunate attempt to escape with old Ezra Cupples she was left unguarded.

As well as anyone she knew the futility of trying to escape from Poison Valley; yet her growing panic compelled her to take advantage of this unexpected liberty. She got out of the big dining-room unseen, hurried from room to room until she emerged onto the veranda at the extreme end of the rectangle. She was in plain view, but everyone was watching the fight. She darted around the end of the buildings, skirted the stableyards, and not knowing what else to do ran blindly toward Frost's cabin.

It was still early. Delly was perparing breakfast, while her mother-in-law sat beside the stove and smoked. The children were still in bed.

"Why, Idy May, what're you doin' here?" Delly gasped.

"I ran away, Delly. They've had me shut up like a setting hen for days in a dark room. There's a fight going on, and I got away from them. Birdie is going to give me to those Indians if I don't marry Clay. Oh, please help me hide some place."

The older Mrs. Satterfield removed her pipe from her mouth. "A fight did ye say? Who's fightin'?"

"Clay and some stranger. Oh, please, Delly. They'll miss me in a minute, and I'd rather be dead than marry Clay, and I don't dare refuse and be given to those Indians. She bragged that Clay would make me like you are——Oh, Delly, I'm sorry I said that," the girl gasped.

"Ye needn't be. I know whut I am. Hadn't been fer that high an' mighty Birdie I mout o' been somethin' myself."

Mrs. Satterfield had moved to the door. "Sounds like somebody mout be gittin' knifed," she said calmly.

Ida May fell on her knees and buried her face in Delly's skirt. "What am I going to do, Delly?" she sobbed.

"I dunno whut'll come of hit, but if ye feel like hidin' in a darker place than yuh been in I reckon I kin hide ye for a spell at least."

Ida May scrambled to her feet. "Where, Delly, where?" she asked eagerly.

"I uster wanta hide from Frost, he was thet mean an' devilish sometimes, an' I fixed me a place thet he couldn't find very easy. Come on."

Mrs. Satterfield was still standing in the doorway as the other two women fled. She was looking toward the scene of battle, her pipe gripped tightly in one hand, a grin upon her wrinkled, caved-in mouth.

"Iffen Frost comes, Ma, tell him I'm hopin' the kids git dressed," Delly said to the older woman. "He'll hope that Birdie 'oman hunt Idy May down."

Mrs. Satterfield made no reply. She seemed absorbed in listening for sounds of the fight that she could not see.

The two sped up the swiftly flowing creek. Some two hundred yards above the house Delly stopped in front of two enormous round boulders that were about six feet in diameter. She cast a frightened glance behind her, stepped out on a flat rock that stuck up a couple of inches above the stream and then vanished behind one of the boulders.

"Come on," she called.

Ida May raised her skirts gingerly and stepped onto the rock. She saw Delly behind the boulders, holding aside a mass of clinging wild vines. When the girl joined her Delly dropped the vines, and Ida May found herself almost in total darkness.

"Thar's nuff room here tuh turn around in, or stretch out," Delly said. "I don't use hit much as I uster. Don't have time now. I've set out here fer hours at a time cryin' an' wishin' I could die. But nev' mind that now. Yuh'll be safe long as yuh wanta stay. Come dark I'll bring ye food an' blankets."

"But won't those Indians find me?"

"Nobody'll find ye. See these poles overhead an' on side away frum the crick? I putt 'em thar years ago, an' now they're plumb covered with moss an' vines. The roof's too steep fer anybody ter try climbin' it, so won't nobody fall in on ye."

Ida May was growing accustomed to the darkness now and could see better. Delly had indeed prepared a neat hiding place. There was even a chair.

"Thank you, Delly," she said, "I don't suppose it'll do any good, but I just can't bear to marry Clay now."

"That's all right, honey, you jest stay hyer till yuh git yo'self comforted. I'll bring ye some truck jes' as soon as I kin sneak away."

Delly peered cautiously through the vines, and finding the coast clear stepped out into the creek and ran to her house. Mrs. Satterfield was still standing in the doorway, listening with a pleased smile.

The sudden ringing of the bell warned Ida May that her escape had been discovered. She stood there trembling, unable to force herself to sit down. The Indians would soon be searching for her, she knew. She shuddered at the very thought of their dark hands touching her, but it was not more repugnant than the memory of Clay Satterfield's forced caresses.

She could soon hear shouted directions as the men searched for her. She cowered finally into the chair. Desperate as her situation was she kept wondering if the stranger she had seen at breakfast had been killed. Now that she thought of it he didn't look like the other outlaws she had known all her life. There was something in their eyes which was missing in his. She didn't quite know what it was. She remembered the warm smile he had given her. Somehow, now, that smile seemed to have a hidden meaning. She dismissed the thought. What could a strange outlaw have to do with her? Yet it was not easy to force the thought of him from her mind.

It was not long until she heard men coming up the creek. They were searching the brush. Two of them passed so close that she could hear their voices. She recognized one of them as Apache Tom. Although part Indian she knew that he was associated only with the whites. She had been afraid of him ever since he had first appeared in Poison Valley. The men had stopped beside one of the big boulders.

"We're out a sight here," one of them said. "Let's rest a bit. What did you think of the fight?" The speaker, she knew, was Jack Cradlebaugh.

"I wanted tuh git in there with my knife," Apache Tom said. "That hombre couldn't have made a monkey outa me like he did Frost. Say, I wonder who slipped him that knife?"

Cradlebaugh's voice seemed to quiver slightly as he answered, "I don't know. He musta grabbed it from somebody."

"Yeah," Apache Tom laughed almost silently. "Where's yore knife now, Cradlebaugh?"

"Why, I—I—left it in the bunkhouse."

"You lie. I saw yuh slip it tuh Heaton."

"Look, Tom; don't give me away," Cradlebaugh pleaded abjectly. "I jest wanted that stranger tuh have a fair show. I knew they intended tuh knife him, an' I knew they wouldn't have the guts tuh go up against cold steel if Heaton had one, too."

"I'll not tell, if you kin git it back from Birdie," the breed said. "But if I happen tuh want any favours yuh'd better remember it."

"Of course, Tom. Hadn't we better be huntin' that gal?"

"No hurry. They'll find her all right. I don't like that stranger nor that old man. They're a pair o' dirty spies."

"Birdie says they wasn't tuh be harmed."

"That's the trouble when a woman has the say-so. 'Stid o' bein' guided by their judgment—if they ever have any—

they're guided by their damn' whims. Frost gave me the high sign tuh git this feller, an' I aim tuh do it. An' when I do I want you to swear tuh Birdie that I was with you somewhere else. Git me? I jest don't want no trouble with her."

"Sure, Tom, I'll—I'll help all I kin," Cradlebaugh promised nervously.

They passed on, and Ida May drew a trembling sigh of relief. She was safe for the moment. She was relieved to know that the stranger had not been killed by Clay and Frost, but she realized he was a marked man. Presently a problem of conscience began to trouble her. He should be warned that Apache Tom meant to murder him. Could she continue to hide here herself, when by coming out and warning him of his danger she might save his life?

She was wrestling with the problem when she heard a noise just outside the entrance to her hideout. There was a little hole among the wines through which she could just see the flat rock which served as a stepping stone across the creek. There was something on that rock now, and a cold shudder went up her spine. Firmly planted upon that rock was a pair of buckskin moccasins!

CHAPTER XI

That the captive girl might herself find a way to escape had not occurred to Val. He stood listening quietly while the matter was being excitedly discussed.

"She can't get away, and she can't hide from these Indians," Birdie said. "Brandy, you go down to the gateway and make sure she ain't got past Bug-eye. We'll search the grounds here first, and then go up the valley on both sides."

She gave more detailed instructions, and then her gaze fell upon Val in the doorway of the bunkhouse. She came over, brushed him aside and went in.

"You fellows ain't got anything to do with this?" she asked suspiciously.

"I been purty busy ever since breakfast," Val said mockingly. "As for my pardner, he still ain't able to use his arms, or git out of bed."

"You know about how far I'd trust either of you, don't you?" Her queer eyes darted here and there. She moved swiftly to the door of the passageway and tried it. She moved swiftly from one end of the room to the other, looking under every bunk.

"Open your mouth, Bill, so the lady kin see if yo're hidin' Idy May under yore tongue," Val said.

"Don't be funny," she snapped. "That girl is a fool to think she can get away from me. I'll make her wish she'd never been born."

"I thought it was Clay she wanted to git away from."

"She was marryin' him this afternoon, and she still will."

"It's none of my business, o' course," Val shrugged.

"You're right. But why don't you get out with the others and help hunt?"

"There's two reasons. One of 'em is that yore esteemed brother-in-law stuck a knife in me."

"Bad?"

"I'll live."

"Well, you've certainly been poison for the Satterfields since you showed up here. Lije gets shot, you slice half an ear off Frost, and jar Clay so he can't get out of bed."

"That's the other reason I'm not huntin'," Val explained. "I'm just afraid they ain't goin' to like it, an' from what I've seen of 'em they wouldn't be above havin' some of their lads put a bullet in my back."

"It wouldn't surprise me either. The only other man in more danger than you is Jack Cradlebaugh. If I told Frost or Clay it was his knife you used he wouldn't last the shake of a lamb's tail. Listen: you keep an eye on yourself till Ulas gets back. He'll back me against his brothers, and we'll bring Frost and Clay around."

She went back to the end of the passageway and unlocked the door. Val saw her drop the key into her pocket.

"We'd better git outa here," Bill Gentry said. "I can't use my arms much, but I shore kin clamp my laigs around the ribs of a horse if I kin git one."

"Pull out just when there's a chance to do what we come for! Bill, I'm ashamed o' yuh. But I sure would like to know where Ida May is hidin'. Bill, if you'd seen that girl you wouldn't think of desertin' her. Man, I tell you she's a thoroughbred."

"I think yo're a sap," Bill said bluntly.

Val had feared the girl would be discovered at once, but as the time passed, and the search became more distant he began to hope that she might have found a safe hiding place. He went over to the door into the passageway and examined the lock.

"Watch the door, Bill," he called, and went to work. Bill got out of bed and moved close to the other door.

With his pocket-knife and a small screwdriver Val set to work. It was not particularly difficult to remove the lock, take it to pieces, and remove a single small spring. He put

the lock back on, and no one could tell it had been tampered with. The key would turn, and it was not likely that anyone would notice that the catch didn't work.

"Looks tuh me like unlockin' the stable door after the horse has done been turned out," Bill jibed.

"May be so. But if they catch Ida May they may hide her in the house again. Anyway, I may want to look things over."

By noon it was evident that the Satterfields were getting worried. Frost, with a bandage around his ear had joined the hunt. The men came back for food, and then resumed the search. Val saw that Lije also was out. He and Frost, he observed, were questioning their mother and Delly.

Another man, too, had joined in the search. That was the Indian, Quanney. His arrival boded no good for Ida May, but it did mean the hunt for Bull Becker had been given up.

Darkness came and the girl had not been found. The search was resumed bright and early the next morning. Val saw Birdie, but the woman was in a vile humour. Clay, too, was ready to join the search, and the looks he gave Val were black and murderous.

With no wish to stay in the bunkhouse all day Val went out to the corral and pretended to join the hunt. He noticed that the breed, Apache Tom, lingered in the vicinity and kept an eye on him. He thought nothing of it at the time, except a vague annoyance. Still, he had expected to be watched.

He prowled around the stables for a while, and finally wandered over to the garden where Delly laboured with bowed back. As always Mrs. Satterfield sat in the shade with her pipe clinched between her teeth. Delly didn't look up as he approached.

"Yore garden looks fine this morning, ma'am," he said.

She straightened and stared at him. "Idy May said to tell ye she overhearn 'Pache Tom say he wuz gonna kill ye. She wanted ye warned," she said tonelessly.

Val stooped over and pulled a young turnip from the ground to cover his surprise. "You know where she is?" he asked.

"I'm hidin' her," the woman answered. "She said I wuz ter tell ye. She didn't think you'd give us away, an' yuh mout hope her."

"My God, woman, that's what I'm here for," he said as he peeled the turnip with the greatest of care. "Where is she?"

"Don't look, but thar's two big boulders at the foot o' that little hill right back o' my house. Yuh step onto a flat rock in the crick, an' Idy May is hidin' right behind them boulders. Ye jest part the vines ter yer left."

"Thank you. Does anybody else know?"

"Ma, yander. She mout take a notion tuh tell, an' she mout not. Yuh'd better be gettin' on now."

Val took a bite of the turnip and moseyed on. He was careful to keep from more than glancing toward the two boulders beside the creek. As soon as he could do so without attracting attention he returned to the bunkhouse. His attempt to appear nonchalant, however, did not get by Bill Gentry.

"What's happened? Yuh look like yuh'd caught a bear by the tail an' didn't know what tuh do with him," the old timer remarked.

"I've caught something. Bill, I'm the only man in here who knows where that girl is. You an' me have gotta git her an' git out of here to-night!" Val replied.

"Ain't suthin' fell on yore haid, has there?"

"I know. This Frost's wife hid her, an' Ida May told her to tell me. The old lady knows about her, too, and she may give her away. That's why we've got to move fast."

"Suits me. I'd sooner try makin' a break than gittin' strung up again."

"Can you use your arms, Bill?"

For answer Bill raised his arms until they were stretched out in front of him. It made him wince. "K'ain't raise 'em above my haid, but I kin hold a gun or ride a horse."

"We could manage if it wasn't for these infernal siwashes. We can't possibly git a horse without they know it," Val worried.

"An' afoot they'd track us down in half a day. 'Fraid we ain't got much chance, son," Bill said.

"We gotta make it, Bill. That girl is too fine to be throwed away on a snake like Clay Satterfield."

They discussed plans in whispers, but there seemed to be no way to get away even if they got out of the valley.

"They can't find Bull Becker," Val said. "If I could just see that old devil he could hide Ida May till we could sneak her out of the country."

"It'd be fine if the gal kin live on lizards like he kin."

"Great encouragement you are," Val said disgustedly. "Anyway, I'm gittin' out of this bunkhouse to-night, an' have a talk with Ida May."

"You'll probably lead the Satterfields right to her," Bill warned.

"I'll have to take the chance."

The second day's search for the missing girl was unsuccessful. The Satterfields were in a vile humour. Once Val caught sight of the old lady, and it seemed to him that she was enjoying some secret, sardonic joke. She was an old witch

if he had ever seen one. It would be like her to betray the girl just as soon as they gave up the search for the sake of the sensation she would create.

Then, just before dark, there was a sudden commotion among the Indians. Val went outside with the other men as the Satterfields came out of the house. Part of the young renegades had kept on hunting for Bull Becker, and one of them had arrived with news that one of their own number had been found with a bullet through his head. It meant that Becker was still in the vicinity.

"You can't do anything until morning," Birdie said finally. "There's no use to hunt for Ida May any longer. We'll just see to it that she doesn't leave the valley, and she'll starve out sooner or later—unless somebody is feeding her." She looked meaningly at Frost Satterfield.

Val felt a sudden chill. Birdie was no fool. Plainly she suspected the truth, and the brutal Frost would easily force his wife or mother to tell where the girl was.

"It's more important to catch Bull Becker than it is Ida May," Birdie went on. "We'll just have to make sure that nobody gets out of the valley that ain't supposed to. Quanney, you take your young men out in the morning, and find Bull Becker. Much firewater for you if you ketch um."

Quanney nodded, and said something to his Indians, but it wasn't long afterward till Val saw the tall Indian enter the house. And he also saw Frost Satterfield hurrying toward his own house.

He had to consider what to do if the girl were discovered. There was no chance to talk it over with Bill. He watched anxiously to see who was sent to guard the gateway. Brandy and Bug-eye had been on duty there almost continuously, and they evidently were to be given a respite.

Presently he learned that the guards were to be Apache Tom and Cradlebaugh. This was hopeful. Cradlebaugh wouldn't help him, but the outlaw might just possibly remain neutral.

So long as the Indians were there he would not be able to leave the bunkhouse by the front door. For an hour he lay still until he was certain all the men were snoring. No alarm had been raised, and he began to hope that the women had not told Frost about the girl's hiding place.

He nudged Bill and slipped out of bed. He saw his old pardner slide his gun out from under the pillow. Both of them had cultivated the habit, since they had been here, of taking off no more clothes than necessary. Sock-footed, Val slipped past the other bunks and reached the end of the passageway to the house. The door opened easily.

He emerged into the first room of the house without difficulty, but getting outside from there offered as much exposure as from the bunkhouse itself. He moved on into the grand front room which was Birdie's throne room. He listened at a connecting door, and could hear someone breathing. He had the feeling that this would be Birdie's room—and a right proper place to stay away from.

The other exit led into the dining-room, with which he was familiar. What lay beyond that he didn't know, except that there was a kitchen, and probably the sleeping quarters of the coloured man. Again he was foiled because the door from the dining-room also opened toward the bunkhouse.

It was dark in there, and although he moved as stealthily as he could his knee banged up against the sharp edge of a misplaced bench. He barely repressed a howl and an oath. The next instant he went flat on his face, and rolled under the table.

"Scat!" Came the voice of Rip from the next room. "Ah thought I put all yo' blasted cats outside. Ah ketches yo', I bus' yo' haid wiff mah boot."

The door opened and the negro stood there with a lamp in his hand. He came grumbling into the room, listened a minute, and retired to his bed.

Val drew himself up on a bench. His forehead was damp. If he got out the way he had planned he would have to wait until the negro got to sleep. The alternative was to try to get through Birdie's bedroom, or take the dangerous course of emerging from the dining-room, where he might inadvertently step upon an Indian.

After a wait of ten minutes, that seemed to be that many hours, he decided upon the exit directly from the dining-room.

Fortunately for him that side of the house was in deep shadow. He emerged slowly, and drew on his boots. Then he edged gently sideways along the wall. He had gone but a few feet when he made out two figures seated upon the ground with their backs against the bunkhouse. One was on either side of the door. They were Indians, and they had assuredly been planted there to see that no one left the building. The least sound, he knew, would make them look up. He faded silently to the ground, and went the rest of the way on hands and knees. Once he saw an Indian move quickly, and he felt sure he was discovered. He removed his hand from his gun as he saw the fellow relax again.

Then he reached the end of that projection from the main building and rounded the corner. He got to his feet, scanned the ground closely and made a quick run to the next one.

Nothing happened. Another run took him clear past the house, and well out of sight of the bunkhouse. A quarter of an hour later he was within sight of the two boulders.

It was some time before he finally landed lightly on the flat rock. He poised there a moment then called softly. "Ida May! This is Val Heaton—your friend."

He repeated the call a second time before he saw the vines quiver. A moment later he saw a white blur that was the girl's face. She thrust the vines aside so that he might enter. He started to enter when a faint rustling sound caused him to look up. He saw a man hurtling down upon him from the top of the nearest boulder. A long, silvery knife-blade gleamed wickedly in the man's hand.

CHAPTER XII

VAL had not time to evade the man springing upon him. He half-whirled and flattened himself against the rock, and at the same time sank in water nearly up to his knees. The knife-blade, aimed for a spot directly between his shoulders struck the boulder instead—and snapped off at the haft.

Val heard the girl give a half-suppressed scream as he was knocked off his feet by the weight of the man's body. The next instant his head was under water, and there was a deadening weight on top of him. Had his foe not broken his knife Val would have been completely at his mercy.

Throwing all his strength into the effort he brought his head above water, and instantly a muscular hand fastened upon the back of his neck and ducked him under again. The man on top of him meant to drown him.

Val choked, and in a sudden paroxysm of panic lifted his antagonist clear out of the water. But now the man's hands were around his throat, shutting off his wind. Suffering as he was Val realized that a yell from his assailant would bring all the Satterfields. His hands went backward, clasped around his foe's head, and with a sudden mighty effort that strained every muscle in his body he hurled his surprised enemy clear over his head, and into the water. The man started to yell, but his head was under water almost before he got out the first sound.

Now it was Val's hands at his enemy's throat, and the enemy's head under water. The fellow had tried to murder him. This was no wrestling match, but a matter of certain death for one of them, and Val was determined not to be that man.

No sound issued from the struggle save the splashing of

their bodies, and that didn't carry far above the chuckling of the swiftly flowing water. There were times when Val's head was drawn under water. Several times he was thrown over upon his side, but always he managed to right himself, and keep his foe's head under. The man's struggles and contortions required the last atom of Val's strength to combat, but suddenly, after the most violent effort of all the man ceased to struggle. His body grew lax. Val loosened his grasp on the fellow's throat, but he continued to hold him under water. Minute after minute passed before Val finally got to his feet and dragged his victim to the bank.

" Oh, oh ! Who is it ? " came the girl's voice. She had joined him on the bank.

Val took a look at the fellow's distorted face. " Apache Tom," he said.

" I heard him say he meant to kill you. Didn't Delly warn you ? " she asked.

" Yes, she did. He must have found out your hiding place and guessed I'd come here."

" Then if he knew, others know," the girl faltered.

" I'm afraid so. Anyway, they'll soon find out. We've got to get you out of here," he asserted.

" I'm afraid it's no use. We could never make it. It would only get you killed," Ida May said.

" I'll get killed anyway if I don't get out of here. You had just as well try to get away with us. You can trust us, believe me you can. My pardner and I came here just to get you away."

" To get me away ? How did you even know I existed ? "

" My dear, we were in Tompkin Spring the night Ezra Cupples was murdered. I talked to Cupples before he died. He told me about you. More than that he had money for you—and a letter."

" A letter ? Did—did he say who—who I am ? "

" Not exactly, but enough to show that you don't belong among these people. So you've got to go with us. It will be dangerous, and we may have a hard time. We may not even escape at all. But I still think you should go."

" Oh, I will. If I stay here I'll have to marry Clay, or they'll give me to Quanney's Indians. I just want you to promise me one thing."

" Well, anything that's humanly possible," Val said doubtfully.

" I want you to promise to kill me before you allow me to be brought back here."

" But my dear girl——"

" I'll not go unless you promise. I simply couldn't bear to be brought back here again, like I was the other time.

Val had to have a minute to consider. "All right," he said soberly, "I give you my promise. After all, I can see that death would be a heap preferable to coming back here and living like Delly does."

"Poor Delly. She said she'd come to-night. They must have found out she was hiding me. If they did Frost will almost kill her."

Val was afraid of the same thing, but he said, "It may be the old lady talked. Delly told me she knew."

"That may have been it. I hope so. But how are we to get out of the valley, and what will you do with—with this—body?"

"I don't suppose there's much use hiding him, but I'll drag him in here where you were. Have you any food?"

"No, I ate the last this evening. Delly promised to bring more. But I have some blankets."

"Good. We'll make a roll of them and take them along."

Dragging the body into the hiding place behind the boulders Val noticed that Apache Tom's hat was gone—and he had had one when he made his assault. Undoubtedly it had been carried down the creek. It didn't make much difference, for there was not one chance in a hundred that he was the only one who knew of the hiding place.

Val made a roll of the girl's blankets, and confiscated Apache Tom's belt to bind it with. "Now listen carefully, Ida May," he said. "I want you to circle around the corrals as far as you can and wait for me down the creek in the brush. I've got to go back to the bunkhouse and get my pardner."

"But won't that be dangerous? If anybody wakes up——"

"I'll have to take that chance. I can't leave Bill Gentry behind."

"He is the man they had hung up by the arms, isn't he?"

"Yes. But they'll never get a chance to do that again," Val gritted.

He saw the girl on her way, and then went back the way he had come. It would be just as dangerous getting back as it had been getting out, and he would have to rouse Bill and get him out without waking the other men.

He could see the Indians still on guard outside the door, but he got into the dining-room unseen. It was easy then to get through the passageway into the bunkhouse. He found Bill awake, and in a few whispered words explained the situation. Bill got up, collected the things he would have to carry, and they started to move.

A man, it was Seven-up Sorensen, suddenly heaved himself straight up in bed. Val's hand sought his gun. If they were discovered now they would have to fight it out the best way they could.

"I hereby pronounce yuh man'n wife," the former elder snorted, and flopped back in bed. He was dreaming, possibly, of the marriage ceremony he had been thwarted from performing.

Still they dared not move. No telling who the man might have aroused. The two other occupants of the room, Bug-eye and Brandy were grunting like men awakening from a logy sleep. The Indians outside were sure to be aroused.

Nothing more happened, however, and they stole across to the end of the passageway and through the doorway. Here, for the first time, Val could speak freely enough to let Bill know what had happened.

"So ye hadda kill a man, huh? I'm glad yuh got the varmint yuh did," Bill said. "I'll bet my pants we have tuh kill a lot more 'fore we git outa this place, an' I hope the first one is that damn' woman."

"Shush! Or you'll git a chance before you want it," Val cautioned. "We got to pass through the room next to where she's sleepin'."

"If I were sure o' that I'd slip in an' cut her throat."

Val looked at his pard curiously. Bill wouldn't have carried out his threat; he was just voicing his hatred, for which there was good reason.

They got through the living-room unscathed.

"Two more hurdles an' we're safe," Val said. They were nearly to the door when Bill's arm suddenly swept something off a side table. There was a crash of china as it struck the floor.

"Under the table and play cat," Val whispered fiercely as he made for the door leading into the negro's sleeping quarters. This time Rip wouldn't be satisfied until he found the supposed cat that had been shut in. He had to be dealt with quickly, silently, and effectively.

It was no more than a second until they heard the negro's bare feet slap the floor. A light flashed under the door.

"This time, cat, I puts yo' out sudden," they heard him say angrily.

The door opened, and a black hand holding a lamp came through. The black man stepped into the dining-room. There was a boot-jack in the other hand.

"Ah fotches with yo' with this boot-jack, cat, an' yo' break no moh dishes," Rip rumbled.

"Meow . . . Meow," Bill imitated from under the table.

"Hsh! Dat don' soun' lak no cat ah kno'," Rip snorted, and took another step forward.

Val's gun barrel rose and fell. It thudded upon the thick skull of the coloured man, but Val had been taking no chances. All the strength of his arm was behind that blow, and it took

a thick skull to keep from being broken. The negro's knees sagged and he fell forward on his face.

Val tried desperately to catch the oil lamp with his other hand, but missed by inches. It struck the corner of a table leg and crashed into a dozen pieces, spilling a quart of coal-oil on the floor which ignited instantly and flared almost to the ceiling.

"Come on, Bill," Val called. "For God's sake hurry."

Bill, however, was at his side almost before he could close his mouth.

They heard one of the Indians outside give the alarm in a wild yell. To go out the way Val had gone before meant certain discovery.

"Come on," Val said. "We gotta go this way."

They dashed into the negro's sleeping room, and discovered, an open window on the other side. They plunged through it, ran across the court and gained the protection of the west side of the house. They kept on going.

They were now back on Val's trail, and he knew where he was going, but the trouble was that to circle the corrals and outbuildings they had to go directly away from the gateway at first, and at the first sign of alarm the Satterfields were likely to send reinforcements down there to make sure they didn't escape.

Val was pleasantly surprised by the speed which Bill Gentry had in his thin, warped old legs. Both men were breathing hard when they crossed the creek just below where Val had fought Apache Tom to the death.

Behind them they could hear excited yells, while already the flames were shooting high. Val had time to hope that Birdie's castle would go up in smoke if they didn't make good their escape. Above the tumult of the rest the woman's voice rose sharp and clear.

"Get buckets everybody. Fight this fire."

"Heaton an' the old man have gone!" somebody else bawled.

Much closer at hand was Frost Satterfield's cabin. They ducked behind a bush as they saw the man rush out.

"Tom! 'Pache Tom!" the man yelled, and ran toward Ida May's recent hiding place.

They had to take chances on the man seeing them. They kept on running. It was plain now that Frost had wormed the secret of the hiding place from the women, and in a minute or so he would discover the girl's escape as well as the dead body of Apache Tom.

Once below the buildings they had to slow down, lest they pass the girl without seeing her. Val feared that she might think he had been captured and give herself up in the hope of

saving him. That would be a tough break after they had gotten this far. Yet he dared not call out to her.

He knew that they could not wait to search for her very long. Jack Cradlebaugh would not desert his post at the gateway, and they must get past him before others arrived. He hoped they could get by Cradlebaugh without killing him, but that would depend upon the man's own actions.

One of them was on each side of the creek. The valley narrowed rapidly until they were almost to the narrows themselves. They were far below where he had expected to find the girl.

" We'll have to go on and grab the man on guard, then you try to hold the fort while I come back an' look for Ida May," Val called across the creek.

" Here I am," came the girl's voice as she stepped from behind a boulder not ten feet away.

" Ida May! Thank God you're here," Val gasped with relief.

" I came as far as I dared so as not to delay you, but when I heard all the noise I was sure you'd never get away," the girl said. " What is that fire ? "

The flames from the burning building were shooting high. It looked as though Birdie's castle was doomed.

" If we only had some horses," Val moaned. But there had been no chance to get any. Any attempt to enter the corrals or stables would have meant sure discovery.

They ran a little farther and stopped.

" Wait here," Val told the others. " I'm going to get that guard, one way or another. Then you two come a-runnin'—an' don't stop if anything has happened to me."

For a moment Ida May clung to him. Already she considered him her protector, and he was grateful for her trust. But there was also self-reliance in the feel of her hands and the glow of her eyes. Ida May was not, nor ever would be, any clinging vine.

" Yuh'd better be ready, because when me an' this gal come, we're comin' a-boilin'," Bill said, and patted the girl on the shoulder.

" I don't know what will happen, but you two have given me the first hope I've had for a long while," Ida May told them.

Val stepped out of hiding and advanced boldly toward the place where the guard would be concealed. The next few minutes, he knew, might be decisive. The guard was in a position to stop them from getting out, if he wanted to. Only, Val meant to remove any human obstacle for the others if he absorbed all the lead in the guard's gun in doing so.

" Halt ! " a voice rang out sharply from the rocks twenty feet ahead. " Say who you are, or I'll shoot."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SENTINEL was too well hidden to be seen, but Val was sure the voice belonged to Jack Cradlebaugh. The man's strained tones indicated he was jittery and excited, and such a man was dangerous.

That the gang had a system of passwords, Val knew. Even Birdie had been challenged when she returned to the valley, and he hoped that the words he had heard her speak on that occasion might still be the password.

" It's Heaton—Captain," he said.

" Ugh ! " the man grunted. " So you know the word ? What do you want ? They never sent you down here to help me."

Val took a couple of tentative steps forward. " They sent me to help you. Somebody fired the house, and they think it was Ida May."

" I think yo're lyin '." The outlaw's voice was getting higher, more shrill.

" Cradlebaugh, listen : I had a fight with Apache Tom a while ago. He tried to kill me. He's dyin', but he told them you gave me that knife. The Satterfields will kill if you don't git away."

" They'll kill me shore if I try it."

" It's yore only chance, man," Val argued desperately. "There'll be four of us makin' the break."

" On foot ? Them Injuns——"

" Will run into hot lead if they find us. They'll torture you to death if you stay. Come with us, and stand a chance for your life, at least," Val urged. He had kept moving in the face of the man's levelled rifle. Suddenly, he was where he could seize the barrel and knock it aside, although he kept fast hold on it.

" That fire gives us a chance ", he said. " If you try to stop the rest of us I'll kill you." He gave a sharp whistle to call old Bill and the girl. They came running. At the same time he saw three or four other shadowy figures running toward them.

" There comes the Indians. Which is it, Cradlebaugh ? " he demanded.

" I'll throw in with you," the man said in desperation. " I've known for some time now I was doomed here."

" Good. Everybody get out of sight. These fellows are too close," Val said.

By the time the three running figures were close enough

to be distinguished as Indians they were little more than a dozen rods away.

"Halt! Say who you are or I'll shoot," Cradlebaugh challenged.

"We Injuns—Cap-a-tane," one of them replied. "You go fight-um fire. We watch-um."

"Git 'em," Bill Gentry whispered, and before Val could interfere to give the Indians a chance to surrender Bill's six-gun roared. Even as it echoed Cradlebaugh's rifle increased the thunder. Two of the Indians crumpled and fell. The third made a tremendous bound and disappeared in the rocks.

"Now you've raised hell," Val cried angrily. "That'll bring 'em all down on us. Come on." He grabbed Ida May by the hand and ran. The others were right behind.

"If you'd used yore gun we'd have got all the varmints," Bill said.

"Anyway, let's hope that fire keeps 'em busy," Val said. "Cradlebaugh, you know the country. Where is the safest hidin' place?"

"The south slope o' the mesa is where they figgered Bull Becker was hiddin'. Fer about three, four miles the whole side o' the mesa is crumbled, an' there's all sorts o' shaped rocks, an' honeycombs. I reckon a man could hide in there forever, but it's on the south side, an' hotter than hell, an' so far as I know there's no water an' no chance to find food."

"How far is it?"

"Eight or ten miles by skirtin' the front, an' a leetle farther goin' over the mesa. But goin' up on the mesa from this side would make it easier gittin' into the rocks from the top. It's all too steep for a horse tuh climb."

"What say, Bill? It looks tuh me like out best bet," Val said.

"Reckon it is," Bill replied. "It may be hard as hell tuh git out of, but the thing tuh do now is find a place where we kin have time tuh think an' plan."

"You, Ida May?"

"Whatever you say. I know they claim the breaks are so hot in the summer you can fry an egg any place on the rocks, but it's not quite summer yet," the girl said courageously.

"Then let's go."

Before they had gone far they heard a hullaballoo at the place where the Indians had been killed.

"Damn' savages, make as much fuss over one o' them gittin' kilt as though he was human," Bill said disgustedly.

Val felt Ida May quail. He squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"Bill ain't as bloodthirsty as he sounds," he said, although he knew that Bill was not exaggerating his own attitude

greatly. To the older generation of which Bill was a part, an Indian wasn't much above the level of an animal.

Cradlebaugh was taking the lead, but he was not a good guide. In the darkness they had to trust him, but he was constantly leading them into places where the going was rough, and sometimes they had to turn back. Bill Gentry occasionally let out disgusted snorts.

They were quite sure that some of the Indians were on their trail. Or if not now they would soon pick it up.

Daybreak came all too quickly. They were at the foot of the mesa, but the " breaks " Cradlebaugh had spoken of were not in sight. The side of the mesa rose sheer, barren, and unbroken. Between them and the raging, roaring Dirty Devil lay a series of bare, reddish ridges and deep-washed gullies. Only along the base of the mesa was there a scattering fringe of brush and trees. Now that daylight was upon them they could be grateful for that shelter.

Cradlebaugh told them that it was another two miles before they could strike the crumpled walls of the mesa.

" Look," Bill Gentry said, " you folks go on an' hide up in the first rocks yuh come to. I'll take Cradlebaugh's rifle an' wait here. I kin see it's gittin' too danged heavy fer him tuh carry anyway. If them Injuns is too close I'll make 'em think they've jumped Bull Becker again."

" But how will you find us ? " Ida May asked.

" That'll be easy. Val an' me have our signals."

" I don't know as I like it, Bill," Val said. " If anybody stays I think——"

" Yeah, yuh allus think ain't nobody kin do anything but you," Bill said in simulated anger. " I'm jest as spry as you are—an' a danged sight better shot."

" All right, Bill," Val conceded. " If you think it best, stay. We'll be seein' you. An' try to shoot somethin' to eat if you shoot anything."

The three of them plodded on. Val no longer held Ida May's hand. The girl looked fragile, but she kept up easily, and voiced no complaints.

" By golly, the more I think o' there bein' no water there the more I think we'd oughta hit fer the river," Cradlebaugh said.

" I thought there was only a few places where you could git down to it," Val objected.

" There is. But it's water. How can we stand it up in them rocks without water when the sun gits high ? "

" We're not keeping you against your will," Val pointed out. " You go to the river if you like, but we can always go down there if it gets too tough, and one of the first things they'll do is watch every known watering place."

Cradlebaugh kept plodding along, grumbling. "I do' know as I hadn't as lief been shot in the first place as tuh die o' thirst."

"We're not thirsty yet," Ida May said.

"By hell, I am," the outlaw answered, as he ran his tongue over his lips.

"Don't do that," Val snapped. "It don't help any, and the more moisture in your mouth you waste the thirstier you'll get. Try to forget it."

Cradlebaugh continued to grumble, but he set a pace which made the others strain to keep up. Now that it was light he seemed afraid there would be an Indian behind every bush. He plainly dreaded the vengeance of the Satterfields, and was perhaps sorry that he had come. But it was too late to turn back now. He had burned his bridges.

They came to the top of a short hogback, and ahead of them loomed masses of white and vermillion cliffs reaching from top to bottom of the mesa, and stretching as far around as they could see. In the beginning, perhaps centuries before, there must have been a titanic landslide which had exposed a great scar of sub-soil which all the forces of nature had began to attack. Great sections of soil had broken away leaving the naked rock standing out in all sorts of weird formations. Erosion had worn great holes in the softer portions of the mountainside.

Val had seen such things before in the Utah and Arizona deserts. He knew that from a distance of say, five miles, it would look like one great sheer face of exposed rock. But at close range it was wrinkled and furrowed. When the sun really hit, it would throw back heat rays like a gigiantic mirror.

"There she is," Cradlebaugh said. "I reckon there's plenty hidin' places till we starve out, but it shore ain't a place I like tuh climb around in."

"It don't look bad to me," Val said. "There must be caves we can get into where it'll be reasonably cool, and we can surely see anybody coming. My idea is to get up about half-way if we can. There's a sort of jump-off there, an' we should find better hidin' places."

"I'd sooner stay close tuh the bottom where we kin make a run fer water," Cradlebaugh said.

Val led the way into the rocks until he felt they would be reasonably safe. He wanted to be higher up, but to make the ascent without careful exploration would be dangerous in more ways than one. Neither did he want to get too far away until Bill Gentry arrived. Once they heard the ominous burr of a rattlesnake and Cradlebaugh leaped like he had been shot.

They paused in a place where they could keep in the shade

until well into the afternoon, and by lying low would be safe from prying eyes. Val was as worried about food and water as Cradlebaugh despite his outward cheerfulness. They couldn't remain here long, and it might be impossible to get away. It was as far as he wanted to get from Bill.

They crouched there for a long time. There was little Val could think to say to the girl in Cradlebaugh's presence, and the man showed no inclination to move away. In fact there was a look in his eyes sometimes when they dwelt upon the girl that made Val bristle inwardly.

The sun began to beat against the rocks so hard that the shade offered little protection. Its rays struck the face of the mountain above and behind them and hurled back the heat. Cradlebaugh's complaints about thirst increased, and could not but have effect upon the others.

Val began to be worried about Bill. His pardner should have arrived long since. He would have gone to look for him, but he didn't want to leave Cradlebaugh alone with Ida May. All he could do was keep a sharp look out. Once or twice he thought he saw skulking figures below the rocks.

Noon came and passed, and still no Bill. Val wondered how it could possibly get any hotter than it was. The perspiration poured from them even in the shade. Wherever they could see a patch of shade there was invariably a panting lizard, watching them out of unblinking reptilian eyes.

"By Gawd," Cradlebaugh broke out suddenly, "this can't last. We gotta have water. An' food. They're sure to have all the water holes watched come dark. We better git tuh the river now. Mebbe we could work our way down tuh Cox's Landin'. They say it can't be done, but tryin' it is better than this."

"There's nobody holdin' yuh," Val told him.

"I wisht I'd never let that old cuss take my rifle."

"You wouldn't carry it in this heat, an' you know it," Val retorted.

"Well, I'm gonna have a drink. What about you, Idy May? Uuh'd better go with me. Don't know as I kin trust yuh with this feller anyway."

"I'm staying with Val," the girl said quietly.

Cradlebaugh muttered something. He looked at Val, and saw something in the puncher's eyes which caused him to move hurriedly.

"I'll come back after dark," he said. "If I had a canteen I could bring water tuh the rest o' yuh. If yuh leave 'fore I git back leave a mark showin' which way you've gone."

"We will," Val said shortly.

Within two minutes of his departure the man was swallowed up in the rocks.

" I feel better with him gone," Ida May breathed.

" Frankly, so do I. I was getting sick of his grumbling."

" I don't suppose there's a real hope of our ever getting away, is there ? " she asked.

" Why, how you talk ! " he laughed. " Of course we'll get away. We may have to travel at night."

" Ever since I can remember I've dreamed of getting away," she disclosed.

" You've had a hard life. Don't you remember where you came from ? "

" Vaguely. I seem to remember rolling hills, covered with some kind of timber different from any I've ever seen here ; a big white house with an ivory-covered veranda around it ; negro servants, a white-haired old negro man, and a fat black mammy. And I have recollections of a sweet-faced lady bending over me whom I'm sure must be my mother. But all of it may just have been something I dreamed. The Satterfields have always told me I was an orphan."

" There's one thing that seems strange to me," Val told her. " You say you've been raised by the Satterfields. You couldn't have gone to school, and yet you speak good English."

" Do I ? " she asked eagerly. " Oh, I hope I do. I just try to talk like the books I read, and like the man who taught me to read did."

" Who was that ? "

" He was just an outlaw they called ' the Earl.' That was before we moved here. They had a hideout over in the San Juan Mountains. I was just a little girl, about eight years old, I guess. I knew my letters and a few words that I picked up from Pa Satterfield. The Earl had been shot in some raid, and he was in bed all winter. I used to take care of him. He had many books which the rest of them used to laugh about. He taught me how to read them."

" In one winter ? " Val asked with a smile.

" Mostly. You see there were none of them easy to read, and I had to learn the hard words as well as the easy ones. It just came easy for me. The Earl was around a couple of years I guess, and he helped me a lot. I got so I could read all his books. Pa Satterfield used to get papers whenever he could, and because it was hard for him to read, and none of his boys knew how he used to have me read to him—when he wasn't drunk. I think that's about the only pleasure I ever had."

Tears came into Val's eyes. Ida May was simply stating a fact, and without the slightest trace of self pity.

" The Earl, what became of him ? " he asked.

"They went away one time; up north to steal a herd of horses, they said. The Earl didn't come back. Somebody was killed, and he was captured. They—they told us he was hanged. I—I—don't believe he could have been a very bad man," she said.

Val noticed she had ceased to perspire. He ran his hand over his own face, and felt it hot and dry. It was a bad sign. The intense heat was having its effect.

"Maybe we'd better not talk any more just now," he said. "You lie down and try to sleep. I'm going to change my position and see if I can't catch sight of Bill."

"You—you won't go far?" she asked anxiously.

"No," he promised, "I'll not go far. If you call out I'll hear you." He was touched by the fact that she trusted him. If Bill didn't come back he realized that she was going to be his sole responsibility. Almost unconsciously he lifted a silent prayer—something he had not done since he was a little boy. He was going to need more than human help, he felt, if he was to get this girl safely back to civilization. And what then, he wondered? She had no folks, knew nothing of the world—and two thousand dollars wouldn't last her a life time.

"Val," Ida May spoke softly. "I didn't mean what I said just now. It was selfish of me. Something must have happened to your pardner, and you must go and look for him. I'll be all right here. I—I was thinking of Cradlebaugh when I asked you not to go far."

"I am worried about Bill, although I never saw him in but one scrape before that he couldn't get out of, and I lead him into that against his better judgment. I don't think Cradlebaugh will be back before dark, but I won't leave you long."

He warily climbed a little higher than they had been and paused. It was surprising how heat, thirst, and lack of food could weaken a man so quickly. He was facing a problem that tried a man's soul. He knew that he could do little for Bill. If he had been killed or captured Val knew that he would only be falling into a trap to go in search of him. No matter what awaited Bill, death, or far more gruesome torture than he had suffered in Poison Valley he had made it clear that Val was not to risk disaster by coming back to hunt for him.

There was still a chance, a good chance, that Bill would turn up safe and sound. But it was hard to stand idly by and contemplate the things that might have happened to a man with whom one had ridden side by side for many years.

CHAPTER XIV.

All efforts to halt the flames that were destroying the rambling house which had been Birdie Satterfield's pride and joy proved unavailing. When daybreak came the woman with the crossed eyes had stood with her hands on her hips and cursed bitterly as she surveyed the ruins of her home.

She was a wild woman at heart, and she was a wild woman in appearance now. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face streaked with dirt, and her long black hair hung down her back in a disordered tangle. She had had time only to seize the first garments that came to her hand when the fire started, and they were torn and burned.

No man had fought half so hard as she to save the house and now it was gone. The sense of defeat was in itself enough to inspire her to insane rage. She had screamed curses at the others for their futility until she was hoarse.

The loss of that house meant more to Birdie than her outlaw associates would ever know. It was her symbol of power. Here she had regained her self-respect in a subverted way from the fears of frustration and humiliation she had endured in a respectable home. Something inherently savage in her nature had made her fight back bitterly against childhood jibes at her deformity until she had lived in practical social ostracism until the coming of Lije Satterfield. But out here, beyond all restraints, she had made herself mistress over her dumb-witted male associates.

It had taken ruthlessness to do it. She had had to establish her ascendancy by being more merciless than they were. She had compelled them to give her the money she needed, and it had cost plenty to buy all the things she had and transport them surreptitiously over hundreds of miles by horse and mule back. Now everything was gone. And one man was responsible!

She knew now that Val Heaton and Bill Gentry must have come to Poison Valley solely to rescue Ida May, and it made her very soul seethe to realize that she herself had aided and abetted them by falling in love with Val Heaton like any soft-headed school girl. That first rude, unexpected kiss had done it. At that moment she had felt that here, at last, was a man whom she could not rule, yet who was capable of tenderness such as the men she knew could never feel.

All the time he had been using her for his own ends, and laughing up his sleeve at her foolishness. Well, she thought fiercely, they would not get away, and when she got him

again he would laugh out of the other corner of his mouth. As for Ida May—Clay or no Clay, that would be a problem which would no longer bother her.

She had been ready to double-cross the Satterfields, and make Val Heaton the leader of the outlaw gang, or even to go away with him if he asked her to. The only one of the Satterfields she had not secretly despised was Ulysses, the youngest, and she liked him largely because she knew he would always side with her against his brothers, and thus he helped keep her in power. She knew that Ulysses was in love with her, and so she kept him dangling to achieve her own ends. Her husband had little more affection for her than she had for him, but lately Frost and Clay had contrived to keep the youngest brother away from Poison Valley as much as possible. If they ever suspected what a fool she had made of herself over Heaton her influence would be gone forever. The only way she could make sure of retaining her power was to capture him, and demonstrate the full extent of her present hatred.

"Well, it's all gone," she heard Frost speaking at her elbow. "Iffen you an' Lije had kilt them fellers when they fust showed up it wouldn't uh happened."

"Shut up," she snapped viciously. "Didn't I hear you say that your mother told you last night where Ida May was hiding? Why didn't you tell me? Instead of that you tried to be smart by having Apache Tom watch the place to kill Heaton, and see what happened. The breed gets killed himself, and because he wasn't on guard where he should have been Jack Cradlebaugh lets them get out of the valley."

"Apache Tom bungled things," he rebutted feebly.

"You all bungle things—even the Indians. Three of them getting killed in the last three days."

There was not an Indian present now save the two girls, Nancy and Jewell. Excited as she had been because of the fire she had taken the time as soon as she found out what had happened to call Quanney and order him to take his young men and pursue the fugitives. They were not much good fighting fire anyway.

Clay came swaggering up. Sore as he was he had fought the fire like a maniac, and he now saw himself as something of a hero. He it was who had dragged Rip out of the burning building, and it had been his idea to break down the passageway, and so save the bunkhouse.

"Ain't them Injuns got back with them fellers an' Idy May yet?" he demanded.

"Chances are they won't get them either," Birdie replied. "But, Lord, if we don't ketch 'em they'll tell sech a story that the lawman'll be shore tuh come in here. The more we

whup back the more'll come. We could go tuh another hide-out, but what would we do with our cattle ?"

"I told yuh it was plumb wrong tuh locate so permanent," Frost growled. "Outlaws like us should keep on the move."

"What're you standing around here talking for then ?" Birdie demanded violently. "Don't leave everything up to Quanney."

"What'd we better do ?" Lije asked.

"First thing, have Delly get everybody some breakfast. I'll have to move in with her, and borrow her clothes. Then, if Quanney ain't reported by that time, we'll hunt them down ourselves. They've got neither food nor water, unless they've gone up on the mesa, and the Indians will track them if they've gone that way. The first thing is to have somebody guard every place before they can reach the river. Then send word to all the men we can reach to watch for them farther out," Birdie directed.

"Which way yuh reckon they'll try tuh go ?" Lije queried.

"No'th—the way they come in," Frost opined.

"I don't think so," Birdie said. "Without horses, or food I think they'll try to hide up some place close—probably in the south breaks—and then make a break for Cox's Landing, because that's the closest place they can hope to get supplies, and because Val Heaton is *such* a gentleman he'll want to get dear little Ida May to shelter as quickly as possible."

She turned away and ordered her Indian girls to help Delly with the breakfast. When the men had gone to wash up she walked over to the bunkhouse. The passageway was all gone, and that end of the building was badly charred.

"Out of everything else we had to save *this*," she said contemptuously as she regarded the men's extra clothing strewn about the place. She wanted to cry when she thought of her own gorgeous clothes, her jewellery, the costly Navajo rugs and blankets that had gone up in flames. Some of it might have been saved had she not tried so desperately to stop the fire until it was too late, and had she not been confused by knowing that Heaton and the others were trying to escape.

She walked over to the door that should have been locked and discovered that it was opened without a key. So that was why Val Heaton had been able to get in touch with Ida May, and how Rip had happened to encounter them in the dining-room. Once more a blush of shame for having been so easily deceived came over her scorched cheeks.

The men were through eating when she finally went over to Delly's house. She would have to live here now, and it was a blow to her pride. She despised her sister-in-law, and she knew Delly returned the feeling in full measure.

"Well, Delly," she said as she entered, "I guess you won't like having me here any better than I like being here, but it's your own fault in hiding that Ida May. You should have known it would get you into trouble."

Delly turned from the stove where she was turning pancakes and placed her hands on her hips. "I'd do it over again, an' I hope Idy May gits away."

One of the woman's eyes was black and almost closed. With sadistic amusement Birdie knew that it was from the effects of Frost's fists. No doubt Delly's body bore worse marks than that.

"You just make it hard for yourself, Delly," she said. "Ida May ain't worth the beatings you'll get for trying to help her, and she can't get away."

"She's at least human, an' that's more than the rest o' yuh air," Delly said, and turned back to the stove. Mrs. Satterfield removed her pipe from her mouth and gave a shrill cackle.

Birdie sat at the table, and commanded Nancy to bring her food and coffee. She would not stoop to argue with Delly. She held the Southern aristocrat's contempt for poor white trash, which Delly indubitably was. But she inwardly vowed that if the woman ever interfered again in her affairs she should be made to feel what real suffering was.

After breakfast, although exhausted from the strenuous battle with the flames, she got on her own spotted pony and rode out of the valley. For one of the few times she could remember it was unguarded. She took the same trail that led up on the mesa which she had ridden with Val Heaton. A strange aftermath of that ride was that Jack Cradlebaugh, who had followed them in order to kill Heaton had now gone with him.

She was sure she would find Quanney at his post, watching for sign from his young men if they found anything, and joined him. If the fugitives were caught she wanted to be where she could get to the scene with the least possible waste of time.

"Nothing yet, Quanney?" she asked.

"Plenty happen," the Indian grunted. "Me ketch-um signal. Find-um one Injun dead—down yonder—in a brush."

"Another one? This keeps on Quanney, you won't have any young men left."

"Me ketch-um more," the renegade said. "Me go Injun dance—take-um firewater. Tell-um young bucks go with me ketch-um plenty silver—plenty firewater—plenty squaw. Young bucks no like um to stay on reservation."

"Well, I hope these you've got will catch that girl and

the men; but if they don't do better than they did running down Bull Becker it's too much to hope for."

"We ketch-um all right. They kill-um down here. That mean they hide-um up in rocks. Purty soon have to come out."

"That's the way I figured, too," Birdie said softly. "No food and no water. I hope they stay in till their tongues turn black. When they come out we'll let 'em get nearly to water before we take them."

"You make-um good squaw for bad Injun," Quanney stated laconically.

During the ensuing hours Birdie made short sorties along the rim of the mesa, overlooking the mass of broken, eroded rocks of the break-off, hoping desperately to catch some sight of the fugitives. The nature of the landscape was such, however, that there was little she could see between the top and the foot of the mountain.

Quanney was more self-possessed. He waited quietly for some of his roving young men to send up a signal.

The shadow of the mesa was crawling far out across the barren wasteland below when a smoke signal appeared. Birdie saw Quanney staring fixedly at something, and following the direction of his gaze she saw the signals.

"Quick! What do they mean?" she demanded.

The Indian disregarded her until the signals ceased. "They mean", he explained then, "Injun ketch-um one man—alive."

'Which one?" she queried excitedly.

"Injun no can tell-um everything with smoke," he said scornfully. "Just say: Ketch-um one man. Mebbeso one man mean-um one squaw. Me not know."

"Anyway, they caught one," she purred. "I hope it's Heaton. We're going down there, Quanney, and in the morning your young men can have their amusement—in a place where the rest of them, if they're in these rocks, can't help but see."

CHAPTER XV

VAL STRAINED his eyes until they ached, hoping to catch sight of Bill Gentry. He dared not get too far from the girl, for by this time the rocks might be swarming with Quanney's Indians.

Once, not long before sundown, he saw smoke signals go up- They boded no good. He was sure that either Bill or Cradle baugh had come upon disaster. The latter had been a fool to leave the rocks in daylight. It was quite likely, however, that the man had repented of going with them, and would

try to make his peace with the Satterfields by leading them to their hiding place. Val had long since decided to change their hiding place as soon as it came dark.

His tongue was getting thick by the time the sun went down, but the coolness gave some relief. He stole back to Ida May in the dusk.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"All right, except for a slight headache. There is still no sign of Bill?"

"Not a sign."

"I saw smoke signals. What do they mean?"

"They mean we'd better be moving out of here. We can't stand another day like this without water. We can't leave Bill, because he may be hidin' some place to join us after dark; so I'm going to try to get us some water."

"But how—where?"

"I don't know yet, but I have an idea that I think will work out."

His idea was a risky one indeed, for he contemplated nothing less than a return to Poison Valley for the supplies they had been unable to secure because of their hasty flight from the place.

They moved considerably closer to the edge of the breaks, and Val left the girl while he went still farther down to wait another hour or so for Bill, and to try to intercept any prowler who might be trying to locate them in the darkness.

He was almost to give it up when he heard the peculiar "hoo-hoohoo," call of a ground owl only a short way distant. He listened until the call was repeated again; then put his fingers to his lips and duplicated the call. He was answered by a slightly different note, and his next reply was more drawn out, "hoo-hoo-hoo hoohoo."

Only a few minutes later he saw a figure scrambling furtively through the rocks.

"Bill!" he called softly. "Over here, Bill."

A moment later Bill Gentry dropped down beside him.

"You danged old cuss you, you sure give me a scare," Val said. "I thought they'd got you."

"How do yuh like livin' among these rocks?" Bill grinned.

"It's pure hell, an' I'm not foolin'. We got to git some water."

Bill swung something around in front of him. "Have a swing," he invited.

"Yuh don't mean——" Val hefted the goatskin water bag, which contained anyway a gallon of water. Even the damp feel of the bag was a relief. "This is the kind of water bag the Indians carry," he said tentatively.

"Yep," Bill nodded. "The cuss who had this didn't wanta give it up. I had tuh knock him over the head twice with a rock to persuade him. Then the thing was empty, an' I hadda wait till dark before I could git back from the river."

"Come on," Val said urgently.

"Ain't yuh gonna have a drink?"

"Not till Ida May has one. That girl's a brick—not one word of complaint all day. But Cradlebaugh went off his nut an' started to hunt for water."

"So that's what the yellin' was about," Bill commented. "I was some afraid it was you."

"What do you mean?"

"While I was hidn' under the river bank waitin' a chance tuh slip away I heard one hell-raisin' commotion, an' I knew them Injuns who was watchin' the gorge had caught theirselves something. It musta been Cradlebaugh. Anyway, it give me a chance tuh sneak away."

"The poor devil," Val said. "We saw smoke signals. Better not say anything to Ida May about this."

The girl was where Val had left her. She had made no outcry but her pleasure at seeing them moved the emotions of both men.

"Here, you have a drink," Val said. "Old Bill here has been down to the river." He held the bag while the girl quenched her thirst. He admired the restraint with which she drank.

Val passed the bag to Bill, who shook his head. Val drank sparingly.

"Well," he said, "shall we travel?"

"The only way we'd have a chance is tuh make for Cox's Landin'," Bill replied. "That must be over a hundred miles, an' barren country near all the way, an' we're on foot. They'd pick us up before we got half-way."

He paused and the others waited. On matters of this kind Val was willing to bow to Bill's experience.

"We got water now, an' if Miss Idy May kin stand tuh eat lizards like Bull Becker does our best bet is tuh hang right here fer a few days till the excitement dies down. Not that it won't be dangerous a-plenty, but the other way would be worse."

"That's what I think," Val said. "And we won't have to eat lizards—not as long as this outlaw outfit runs cattle up here on the mesa. And when we leave we want horses."

"Then we better git us a heap farther up these rocks," Bill said. "There's caves up above somewhere, an' where there's caves there may be water."

They began to climb. It was hard, dangerous work even in daylight. Old Bill led the way, with Val bringing up the rear

where he could catch one of the others if they happened to fall.

It was long past midnight when they struck a narrow ledge with a sharp overhang overhead. They followed it for several hundred yards, then Bill stopped abruptly.

"Look!" he called. "Private rooms for everybody."

"With bath?" Val asked.

"No—damn! With rattlesnakes," Bill howled, as there came an ominous buzz.

"Fine house-hunter you are," Val jeered. The rattle of the snake had caused Ida May to cling to him suddenly. He found it rather pleasant.

Bill finished the snake with a rock, but nobody cared to enter the row of caves under the overhang. The ledge itself ended a few rods beyond, and when Val tossed a rock over the end of it they could hear it bouncing and rolling hundreds of feet down.

The men made sure there were no more snakes, and they crouched against the rocks to spend the remainder of the night. They kept the girl between them for the sake of warmth. The chilly night air was as unpleasant as the hot day had been.

They dozed uneasily until a crimson glow in the east brought in the new day. They explored the shallow caves then. If they kept out the snakes the caves would be relatively cool. The problem now was to obtain food. They had no fuel even if they found meat of some kind, and they were unable to stand the kind of food Bull Becker had got used to even if they faced starvation.

Each man took a drink of water, and leaving Ida May and the water bag behind they went back along the ledge. Val was determined to get up on the mesa to look for food, and Bill decided to spend the day searching for water. They made careful note of their position and separated.

It was hard, risky climbing to reach the top, and Val was coming to regret that they had not headed for the top of the breaks first rather than the bottom. There were times when he negotiated some narrow ledge where a misstep would have sent him into space for hundreds of feet. Before the sun was an hour high it was hot, and he discovered that he was weaker than he had thought from lack of food.

Once he paused where he could look back over the whole country below, and to his surprise made out a gathering of at least a dozen people on top of a small, pulpit-shaped rock that was visible from almost any place on the face of the mesa. They seemed to be doing something, but he couldn't make out what it was.

"Jest git yore hands up—an' keep on lookin'", a voice spoke from just above and behind him.

Val gave a start. He was caught completely at a disadvantage. He raised his hands, heard somebody scrambling down the rocks. He braced himself. If the fellow came within reach they would both of them go over the cliffs below. But the scrambling stopped, and he heard a chuckle from ten feet away.

"So it's you, eh? Dawg-gone the luck, I wuz gonna make yuh jump that cliff tuh see how fur yuh could roll."

Val whirled. "Bull Becker! So this is where you're hidin' out."

"Waitin' tuh git a shot at that she-devil," Becker said. "You huntin' me by any chance?" He was as unkempt as before; a tall menacing figure in his rags, with the barrel of Bill Gentry's rifle pointed steadily toward Val.

"Yes, but not for the reason you think," Val said. "We're hidin' from her, too. Did you know we burned her house down?"

"No? What happened?"

"Put down that rifle an' I'll tell yuh."

Becker found a flat rock some twenty feet away and sat down with the weapon across his knee—still pointed at Val.

"Takin' no chances on yuh, cowboy," he said. "Fur's I know the she-devil may o' bribed yuh tuh lift my scalp."

Val laughed good naturedly, and told the ex-outlaw chief what had transpired.

"It's a good yarn—if it's true," Becker said when he had finished.

"Well, I've got to rustle some grub," Val said, rising. "If yo're goin' to use that gun on me you'd better be doin' it, because I'm goin' away from here."

"Hole yo' horses, young feller," Becker said. "I kinda think yo're tellin' the truth, an' if yuh have yuh got in more licks than I have. If grub an' water is all yuh want I kin fix yuh up all right."

"You can? No lizards. Remember we gotta lady with us."

"Yuh may be dinged glad tuh eat lizards an' rockchucks 'fore yuh git outa this," Becker reproved half-angrily. "But come with me; I'll give yuh all the jerky yuh kin carry back."

It was not a great distance back down the breaks until they came to a cave much larger than the ones Gentry had found. A couple of calf hides were lying on the rocks, and there were many strips of meat drying in the sun. In that hot, dry atmosphere the meat was as nourishing as though it had been cooked, and only slightly less palatable. Val thought he had never tasted anything better.

"Water?" he asked.

Bull Becker led the way to the back of the cave, which arched so high at the rear that Val couldn't see the ceiling. But he could hear a steady, drip-drip-drip of water from overhead. Then Becker showed him a shallow pool which he had dug out to catch the water seeping through from above. It was clear and cold.

"Look here, Bull: instead of carrying water down over these rocks why don't I fetch my friends up here and live with you?"

"Shore, shore, go ahead. I'll go down with yuh," Becker said.

Val took enough of the jerky along to supply the immediate needs of Ida May and Bill. In the excitement of finding Becker he had forgotten about the men he had seen on top of the pulpit rock until they reached a place where the whole panorama of the badlands lay before them.

"My Gawd," Becker said. "It's them infernal Injuns, an' they're torturin' somebody."

"Cradlebaugh!" Val ejaculated. "They must be doin' it in the hope that we'll see them."

"That's a typical trick of Cross-eyed Birdie's," Bull said.

"I didn't think anybody could be so damn' vicious," Val murmured. "Bull, we've gotta save that poor devil someway—or at least put him out of his misery."

They hurried on at the risk of their necks. Val signalled before they reached the place where he had left Ida May. The girl came running. She was half-hysterical.

"Look!" she cried. "Those Indians—they're torturing somebody." From there the Indians could be plainly seen as they danced around somebody who had been tied upon a sort of rock altar. Smoke seemed to be issuing from one end of it.

"Great God!" Val said, "they're cooking the man."

"Oh, do something," the girl pleaded. "If nobody else will, I'll go down there myself. It's Quanney's Indians, and Birdie must have told them to do what they're doing."

"It's Quanney's Indians, all right," Val agreed. "Birdie may or may not have told them to do it, but they've brought the man up there in sight with the hope that we will do just what you say you'll do."

"Won't do no good, Idy May," Becker said. "They'd torture you too if they caught you."

"Oh," the girl moaned. Then, for the first time, she seemed to see Bull Becker. "Mr. Becker," she breathed. "I knew what they were doing to you. I'd have helped you if I could."

"Yeh, I reckon yuh would, Idy May, an' I'm plumb ashamed I didn't kill a few Satterfields because o' the mean

way they treated you. Heaton here tells me old Ez Cupples got kilt tryin' tuh git yuh away. I wuz plumb fooled in the ole reprobate. I didn't figger there was a decent impulse in his carcass."

"He was kind to me," Ida May said simply, "and he died for me."

"How come he didn't git yuh away?" Becker asked seriously.

"He tried. He got outside and bought a buckboard and a team of mules, and hid them as close as he could get to Poison Valley. Then he stole horses for us, and we thought we had got away until they overtook us in the night, killed Uncle Ezra and brought me back."

"Was Birdie with 'em?"

"Yes."

"Been me I'd at least have got her," Becker said. "A he outlaw is bad enough, but a she one is a million times wuss."

"Here, Ida May, is something to eat," Val said. "As soon as you get some strength we'll go back to where Becker lives. It's safer and more comfortable."

"But that man," she protested. "You can't leave him like that."

"No," Val said, "I reckon we can't. You stay here till Bill Gentry comes back, Ida May, and tell him to follow our sign back to Becker's cave where there's plenty of food and water. Come on, Bull, let's see if we can git ourselves an Indian."

It was a minute before Ida May realized that she had rashly sent the man she now considered her one protector out to a possible death.

"Come back," she cried shrilly. "Oh, please come back."

The answer echoed fadingly from far below. "You stay put till Bill comes back."

CHAPTER XVI

Jack Cradlebaugh lay stretched upon a cairn of rocks which his tormentors had erected for the occasion. He was stripped to the waist, and his torso revealed many cuts and bruises. The young Indian outlaws had not been gentle in their treatment of him. Moreover, he had not yet received the drink he had left the safety of the breaks to get. He was tightly bound, hand and foot, and his eyes glittered with pain and apprehension.

The preparations of his foes had been slow. Dreadfully

slow. If they had only got it over with at once he might have died like a man. But while they were building the cairn they had allowed him to see that they were leaving a hole under one end to compose a sort of open air oven over which he was to be slowly baked.

The man had but one hope. That was that in the end his former associates would not allow him to be burned. He hugged the thought to him with desperate hope that Birdie was only trying to frighten him, and at the last moment would relent. He had talked with her that morning.

Birdie had sent Quanney down the night before to handle his Indians, and she had arrived the next morning with her husband and two brothers-in-law. That was just before they had taken Cradlebaugh up to the pulpit rock.

"Well, Jack," she had said, "it looks like you'd got yourself into a pickle by double-crossing your friends."

"Birdie, I didn't double-cross anybody," the man declared fervently. "You got me all wrong. In the first place Apache Tom left me, an' I was alone. When that feller Heaton come he had the password, an' I thought it was Apache Tom comin' back. He got the drop on me, an' made me go with 'em."

"You hear that, Lije, he says he had to go with 'em?" the woman said, and Cradlebaugh took hope.

"Honest," he avowed. "I got away from 'em as soon as I could, an' I was on my way tuh tell yuh where they are."

"An' where are they?" Clay demanded.

"In the breaks. Let me go an' I'll take yuh right tuh where they are."

"You think they're fools enough to stay where you left 'em? And you think we're fools enough to believe anything you say? Heaton would never have let you escape with your six-gun. You were trying to get to water, and maybe murder some of these Indians," Birdie told him harshly.

"Now look here——" the man began to bluster.

"Shut up!" she screamed so fiercely that the captive seemed to shrink before their eyes. "You run your course some time ago, Cradlebaugh," she went on. "I'll tell you something, boys: this poor fool has been trying to make love to me for a long time. He followed me one day when I was trying to find out what Heaton was up to. It was the day he claimed Bull Becker killed his horse. But it was Heaton shot his horse—to keep from having to kill him. They've been in together ever since. Cradlebaugh is as much of a spy as Heaton and Gentry, and a traitor besides."

Clay Satterfield drew his gun, and stepped forward with a growl.

"Wait," Birdie cried sharply. "Don't be a fool. This fellow belongs to the Indians. You want to have them turning on us? And I've an idea that if they can work on him where our friends can see the fun it may bring 'em out. That Heaton is as big a fool as Ida May."

She turned to Quanney, who in turn addressed his followers in a few grunting sentences. Immediately the young renegades picked up the shrieking, pleading Cradlebaugh and carried him toward the sacrificial altar they had decided upon. They were a wild, mangy looking lot, these young Indians who had turned outlaw. They were, for the most part, dirty, ragged, and unkempt. Their uncombed hair was cut off just below the neck. Few of them were twenty years of age. Old Quanney had taught them how to sneak away from the reservation for a few months at a time to rob and kill, and when they became sated with violence they would return quietly to their reservation homes and until the blood lust struck them again be "good Indians." In this wild, desolate land, far from even a semblance of civilization they could carry on their depredations in safety, and their present employment was exactly to their taste.

"Well, Birdie, ain't you goin' along?" Frost asked.

The woman shuddered.

"I see enough of those red devils the way it is. No; I'm going to stay here. You men go on up and watch."

"Not me," Lije declared.

The other two concurred.

"Then at least spread out so that you can see if Heaton and Gentry come close," she ordered.

"Aw, hell, they've pulled out," Frost declared. "I bet we hear of 'em at Cox's Landin' in a day or so."

"On foot?" Birdie laughed. "They can't get half-way before these Indians overtake 'em. Ida May can't walk a hundred miles. Did you send word to have Ulas stay there and wait for them if they do get through?"

"Shore did," Clay answered. "Be a good joke tuh chase 'em clar tuh the Landin' an' then let Ulas pick 'em up jest when they think they're safe. Even if Ulas misses 'em ole Cox wouldn't dare he'p 'em git away."

"Take no chances on anything," Birdie said crisply. "I'd rather let Ida May get away now than let Heaton escape."

The Indians had picked up Jack Cradlebaugh and were bearing him away. His screams of entreaty fell unheeded upon the ears of the Satterfields. Presently the three brothers mounted their horses and rode away in different directions, while Birdie found herself a ravine covered with hackberry bushes, and dismounted in the shade to wait. She was just

out of sight of the pulpit rock where Cradlebaugh was to be tortured, and practically out of earshot.

She had little thought for Cradlebaugh. She didn't want to hear his pleas, but she could fondly imagine that it was Val Heaton being tortured. If he were ever captured she vowed that she would personally witness his torment. She had been a fool, she realized, to fall in love with the man, but that was exactly what she had done—the first time he had kissed her. He was a fool. She could have made him rich.

She was sure he had never seen Ida May before. He must have risked his life to rescue her in hopes that he would be able to collect some kind of a reward. He had turned her, Birdie, down because of her eyes. What fools men were.

At last the infernal yells of the red demons beat upon her ears. Their cruel, fiendish amusement had begun. She saw her pony prick up its ears. Then, above the yells of the young bucks sounded the agonized screams of their victim.

She wished then that she had gotten farther away. She looked down the ravine, but there was no brush in that direction. She would just have to shut her ears to the sounds. After all Cradlebaugh had brought it on himself.

The fiendish yells of the Indians grew in intensity, and the scream of the victim correspondingly fainter. Despite her determination to be hard and unfeeling Birdie was unable to keep from staring toward the place. Without knowing it she was wringing her hands so hard that they would be sore for days.

Since the day she had found herself married to an outlaw, with social ostracism behind her, and destined to be an exile the remainder of her days she had resolved to quell every womanly impulse that might rise within her, and become utterly ruthless in getting out of life everything that her peculiar environment had to offer. She had thrown old Bull Becker into a pit and left him there to survive as best he might. She had strung Bill Gentry up by the thumbs and laughed at his misery. She had calmly given the order for Ezra Cupples to be shot down without mercy. She had made a virtual slave of Ida May, and helped to make the life of her sister-in-law, Delly, a hell on earth, and all without a qualm. But the agonized shrieks of a man being burned alive was almost more than even her barbaric spirit could endure.

She had given the order, but she realized that it would now be impossible for her to stop the torture even if she wanted to. So long as it lasted now the Indians would be insane with their lust for blood. Any interference on her part would be resented and ignored. She knew to a nicety

just how far her influence would extend. So far as the young bucks were concerned she had no authority over them. She could reach them only through Quanney, who knew what advantages were to be gained through association with her; but even Quanney could do only so much with his young hellions.

"Don't move, you she-devil!" a harsh voice suddenly grated upon her ears.

But Birdie did move. She whirled entirely around, her hand fumbling automatically for the six-gun at her side.

"Bull Becker!" she exclaimed.

"Go on, go on an' reach for it," the old outlaw invited. "Gimme an excuse tuh shoot ye."

"Hold it, Bull," another voice spoke, and Birdie recognized Val Heaton. They had crept up a dry wash, and so intent had she been in looking the other way that they were not a rod from her. She wisely let go her gun.

"What do you two cheap crooks want?" she sneered.

"Enj'yin' yose'f, eh, listenin' tuh the yells o' that pore devil they're roastin' up there? Why ain't ye up there tuh see it? B' Gawd, I've a notion tuh shoot ye through both laigs an' leave ye tuh the rattlesnakes," Becker croaked.

"And bring Quanney's Indians down on you? You won't do that," Birdie laughed harshly.

"We've got no time to quarrel, if we're to do anything for that poor cuss up yonder," Val said.

"They's on'y one thing we kin do," Becker said, "an' I'm the one got the guts tuh do that. I'd like well tuh kill this fee-male catemount right now, but we need her tuh save our own hides. You take her cross that ridge an' tuh the aidge o' the thick rocks, an' be ready tuh kiver me when ye see me comin'."

"I hate to do it, but I guess it's the only way," Val said. He was thinking of the way Bull Becker hoped to save Cradlebaugh. Birdie, however, misunderstood.

"You'd better hate to do it so much that you'll let me go right now," she declared hotly. "You're surrounded. None of you can hope to get away, and if I don't have the Indians burn you, too, you'll be lucky."

Val reached for her gun. He got it—and a hard slap in the face at the same time. He caught her wrist, gave it a sharp twist that turned her around and brought a cry of pain.

"One more squawk out of you, and I'll break it off," Val threatened angrily.

"Don't show her no mercy if she gits funny," Bull Becker threw back as he scrambled on up the ravine.

"You bet I won't," Val said. "If anybody'd told me there was a woman on earth as heartless as you are a week

ago, I'd have told him he was a liar. Now you listen to me: if breakin' your neck would save anybody else I won't hesitate a second about doin' it. Come on now, get going."

By twisting her arm he could force her into any action he chose, but he couldn't well control her tongue.

"You idiotic fool," she said, "don't you know that this will only make things worse for you? You can't get out of those cliffs no matter what you try. You'd better give up. If Ida May marries Clay and I get my hands on Bull Becker you and your old pardner can go."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You dirty, low-down pup, you didn't have the nerve to come in fighting like a man. You had to kiss me, make love to me. Well, you'll remember that when Clay and Frost get hold of you. You'll think Quanney and his Indians are just Sunday School boys in comparison with them."

"Shut up and walk faster," he said brutally, and gave her arm a vicious twist. Thereafter, when she tried to start another tirade he shut it off with more pressure on her arm. He didn't hate to do it, with Jack Cradlebaugh's cries ringing in his ears.

They crossed the ridge and started toward the broken face of the mesa above. They were now out of hearing of the torture save for an occasional whoop. Then, suddenly, they heard the crack of a rifle! Val hoped fervently that the shot had been fired by Becker. He twisted the arm of the woman until she broke into a run.

Birdie was breathless and sobbing with anger when they scaled a sharp rise and reached the foot of a cliff that rose twenty feet above them. She suddenly dropped to the ground, declaring her refusal to stir a foot farther. A few rods away Val could see a way to climb to the top of the cliff. He caught the woman's other arm, twisted both of them behind her, and exerted almost pressure enough to twist her arms out of their sockets. Birdie was not the fainting kind. She screamed, but got to her feet.

"Don't," she cried, wildly. "I can't stand it."

"Then keep movin', an' no more damn' foolishness," he gritted, as he relaxed the pressure. "Git up there."

Half-pushing, half-lifting, he got the woman up to the top of the cliff. They could see the pulpit rock from here, and a whole panorama of action was being unfolded before their eyes.

There were no Indians left on the pulpit rock—only an inert figure from which came no sound, that was bound to a smoking altar. A few of the redskins were in sight, and they were headed this way. At the same moment Val heard a yell from below, and he saw one of the Satterfields ride into

sight. The fellow fired three shots as a signal, and then spurred toward them.

There was a two-foot rim projecting some three feet on the very lip of the cliff. Val picked Birdie up bodily and stood her out there in plain view. He fired a shot to attract attention, then deliberately pressed the muzzle of his gun against her head.

"Your friends had better realize that I mean business," he told her grimly. "Unless Becker gets back here alive this will be the end of Cross-eyed Birdie."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIGHT of his wife's predicament brought Lije Satterfield to a sudden halt. Less than a minute later he saw Bull Becker loping across the rocks like a jack rabbit, with a dozen Indian bucks only a few hundred yards behind in hot pursuit. Owing to the rough nature of the terrain none of them could get a shot at the fleeing man. Lije, lower down, had a far better chance. He leaped to the ground, jerked out his rifle and started to draw a bead. An uplifted hand, palm outward, that swept down warned him that a shot from him would cause his wife's death. He hesitated, and then Bull Becker dodged into the rocks like a rabbit into its burrow.

Lije Satterfield suddenly threw the spurs to his horse to head off the Indians. They, too, had seen Birdie, but were too intent upon getting the man who had robbed them of their fun to mind. Lije shouted at them. When they didn't stop he fired a shot directly in front of the leading Indian. That stopped them, but for a moment it looked as though they might turn upon Lije himself.

"You fool, you're going to get us all killed by those Indians," Birdie said, and for the first time there was a note of fear in her voice. She had used them for her own purposes, but a false move might easily make her the victim of their savage frenzy.

"I'm glad you realize what you've stirred up," Val retorted. "Associatin' with outlaws is bad enough, but to use Indians, and renegades at that, is pretty low for a woman to stoop to."

"Go ahead with your insults. I'll make you eat every word, and crawl to me on your belly for mercy like Jack Cradlebaugh did," the woman said viciously.

Nothing was to be gained by quarrelling. Val devoted his full attention to what went on below. Becker had disappeared. Quanney had got the young bucks stopped and was talking

to them with the slow, deliberate gestures which only an Indian can use properly. A few minutes later Quanney went to meet Lije.

"Hey, bring the she-devil an' come on up here," Val was startled to hear Bull Becker call from just above.

"No; I'll not go," Birdie cried. "Try making me and I'll throw myself over this cliff."

"All you'll get for your pains will be a broken leg or arm—it ain't high enough to kill you," Val told her calmly. "Come on. You're going along it if I have to knock you cold and carry you." He caught her arm and jerked her off the narrow parapet.

"You brute!"

"And that comes from the woman who could sentence a man to be burned at the stake," Val said.

"Bull Becker will kill me," she whimpered.

"I think not," Val assured her. "We need you too much to make our getaway. If you get killed it'll be your own fault. But if you try any funny business Becker can have his way. Have I got to twist that arm again?"

"Don't do that, and I'll go where you want," she surrendered sullenly.

"Wal, I'm glad you didn't slay her," Becker said. "I want time tuh think up a way tuh make her suffer worse than she did me an' Jack Cradlebaugh."

Val didn't ask any questions about Cradlebaugh. He already knew. He made Birdie follow the old outlaw, while he himself brought up the rear.

"Look, that's no use botherin' with that shehellion," Becker said once when Birdie began to lag. "You jest go on ahead an' I'll overtake ye in five minutes."

Val said nothing. He got a look at Birdie's face, and he saw that she was pale from actual fright and the unusual, unexpected exertion of climbing up and over precipitous rocks. And she had good reason to fear Bull Becker.

The course Becker took was so devious that Val admitted to himself that he was completely bewildered. Yet the old outlaw seemed to know where he was going, and presently they emerged at Becker's hiding-place.

"Easier tuh come here than it was tuh go back tuh where yuh leff the girl," Becker explained. "I'll take over Cross-eyed Birdie now, an' yuh kin go git yore friends."

"No!" Birdie cried. "Val Heaton, don't you dare leave me alone with him. He'll kill me. If he does you'll never get out of here."

"You'll guarantee safe passage for us then if I save your life?"

"Yes, yes, of course. You show me a way out of these

rocks and let me go, and I'll send you horses and all the food you need."

Val silenced Becker with the first word. "We're not that silly, Mrs. Satterfield," he said. "You're going with us to Cox's Landing, and you'll walk every step of the way if we don't get horses. In the meantime, you get into that cave and stay there. If you try to leave I'll not be responsible for anything Becker may do. If you're hungry or thirsty you'd better get a drink before you go in—and help yourself to the jerky."

"Water!" the woman exclaimed. "I thought there was no water on this end of the mesa!"

"Thar's plenty of it, an' plenty o' outlaw beef," Becker grinned at her. "We're livin' right comf't'ble."

Birdie drank heavily, but ignored the jerky. Val drew Becker aside and warned him solemnly that their protection depended upon keeping the woman alive.

"Aw, hell, I kin git ye out," Becker said. "I been livin' like a animal fer all these years just tuh git my hands on that fee-male, an' before I'm through I aim tuh take that white neck in my hands an' break it like I would a rotten stick."

"I don't want any trouble with you, Becker," Val said. "After we get Ida May out of this mess I don't care what happens, but until then leave Birdie alone."

Bill Gentry had returned long before Val reached the other hiding-place. Neither Bill nor Ida May made any effort to conceal their relief.

"Are you all right?" the girl asked anxiously.

"I'm fine. Are you ready to travel?"

"Ida May says Bull Becker has found water up above," Bill remarked. "That oughta make it plumb easy for us tuh live the life o'Riley."

"The only thing is if Becker could find water those Indians may find us," Val reminded. "Not that we're going to wait there till they do."

"What happened?" the girl asked. "I looked down there once and they were dancing around poor Jack Cradlebaugh so that I couldn't bear to look again for a long time. When I did they had all gone."

"Cradlebaugh is out of his misery. Becker saw to that," Val answered soberly. "I don't think he actually suffered much. They were just really getting ready to enjoy themselves when Bull got there."

"You mean Becker had to—kill him?" Ida May faltered.

"It was the only merciful thing to do. Becker had a close call as it was. If we hadn't happened to pick up Birdie a few minutes before we might neither one of us have got away."

"Birdie! Where is she?" the girl cried.

"Becker is holding her prisoner. We're going to take her with us to insure ourselves against attack."

"Oh, I can't go where that woman is, I just can't," Ida May wailed.

"Stop it," Val ordered curtly. "This is a matter of life and death. We've got to take advantage of every break that comes our way, and then there may not be enough."

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "I spoke without thinking. I'm ready to go."

Not until they were back at Becker's cave did Val draw a relieved breath. He had more than half expected to find Birdie Satterfield murdered. The woman came to the mouth of the cave when she heard them. She looked Ida May over coolly.

"Still playing the fool, I see," she remarked. "Before you're out of this you'll wish you'd have married Clay."

"I think anything would be better than that if it should make me turn out the kind of person you are, Birdie," Ida May said quietly.

"Are you feeling sorry for *me* ?" Birdie retorted.

"I've always felt sorry for you. Even Delly has been far happier than you've been."

"Better keep her out of my sight if you don't want her to get hurt," Birdie told Val arrogantly.

"I wouldn't forget Bull Becker if I were you," Val reminded coldly.

The three men went into conference. All knew that their situation was at best precarious. A hundred miles lay before them in which they would be harried by outlaws, white and red. Only by the lucky chance of capturing Birdie Satterfield would they have a chance of making it. Even Bull Becker realized that. But to make two women, one of them utterly unwilling, walk across that dry, heat-ridden terrain was appalling to contemplate.

"We've got to get horses," Val declared. "Or at least one horse. It was sure a powerful wrench for me tuh leave Birdie's horse behind to-day. If I thought there was one chance in a thousand of it still bein' there I'd go back now an' ride it around to the other side of the mesa."

"You'll poke yore big nose again' a bullet, that's what you'll do, if yuh go messin' around," Bill told him.

"Just the same I'm goin' to git at least one horse," Val retorted. "In fact I think I'll get five horses."

"Whut yuh got up yore sleeve now, yuh young brass-head ?" Bill demanded quickly.

"We've got Birdie, ain't we ? And nobody's goin' to git harmed as long as we have got her. I'm going back to Poison Valley."

" It's a fool idee," Becker said bluntly. " 'Long as Birdie is free they'll do whut she tells 'em, but make no mistake, they'll be plumb glad tuh git rid o' her. If yuh figger on her fer pertection yo're jest crazy."

" That's the way I figger," Gentry put in. " Even her husband wouldn't raise a hand tuh save her life."

" That's where you're wrong. He did interfere to-day," Val argued.

" That wuz because they didn't have time tuh think about it," Becker contended.

" We're safer here than we would be anywhere else, if you chaps are right," Val told them. " If I can get some horses we'll stand a better chance, and if I fail you two can still get Ida May to safety."

" An' I kin deal with that hellion in yonder," Becker gritted.

Despite their arguments Val insisted upon making the attempt that night. But first he had to have a talk with Ida May. He took the girl to the mouth of one of the caves and seated her upon a boulder.

" We ain't had much time to talk, Ida May," he said. " I told you I got a letter and some money from Ezra Cupples that belongs to you. Here it is—two thousand dollars. You'll find the letter inside."

Ida May scarcely glanced at the money. She fingered the letter, mutely asked consent to read it.

" Go ahead," Val smiled. He could see the disappointment that spread over her face when she had finished.

" I still don't know who I am," she said.

" Don't let it discourage you. You know that you were kidnapped by old man Satterfield and Ezra Cupples. It'll be easy to find out where they come from, and who they had a grudge against. This money will be ample to help you find your people."

" I hope so," she smiled bravely. " And, no matter what happens, I'll never be able to repay you for what you've done. I still don't understand why you ever tried to follow me to such a place, but I do thank God that you did."

" Well, Ida May, since seeing you I've been mighty glad that I did." His tone brought a quick blush to her cheeks.

" You mustn't trust Birdie," she warned. " But I do feel so sorry for her. I can remember when she came to Poison Valley. She wasn't at all like she is now. At first she didn't seem to realize what kind of people the Satterfields were. And then, all of a sudden, she became cold and hard and cruel. If they were mean she showed them she could be meaner ; if they did some wild, desperate thing she would sneer at them, and make them do something that was wilder

and more desperate. She is like—like a person that is being driven by some evil spirit. I honestly don't believe she has been in her right mind for years."

"The main thing is for you to keep out of her way, Ida May. You leave her to Bill and Becker. Remember, she isn't to be trusted a single minute."

"Where are you going?" she cried in alarm.

"Well, somebody has got to do a little scouting, and since I'm the youngest I think it should be me."

"Is it—absolutely necessary?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Val, I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you."

"Nothing is goin' to happen," he laughed, "and if it did Bill Gentry will get you out of this. You can trust Bill to the limit."

"I know it, but it—it—would be different."

She got to her feet, and clung to him for a moment in sudden desperation. He kissed her on the forehead, and then on the lips. He became aware in that moment that this girl was very dear to him.

"Remember," he said as he released her, "you're going to be all right."

He watched her go back to the others, then dropped off the ledge and disappeared. The breaks had long been in shadow when he emerged from the rocks close to where he had first entered them. He moved warily, knowing that there were probably guards all around both top and bottom of that end of the mesa. It would be too bad for whoever was unfortunate to be seen first.

The nicker of a horse came to him faintly, and he changed his course. He was working his way right around the foot of the mesa, directly away from the way he had started to go. Once he dropped flat to earth when he heard grunting guttural voices. Two Indians had come together almost in front of him. While they talked he got below them, and proceeded toward the spot the nicker had come from.

An hour later he was about to give up the search when he again heard voices. This time they were in English. They came from a thick clump of hackberry bushes not far from where Jack Cradlebaugh had met his doom. Val soon realized that two of the Satterfields had come together here, and left the Indians to do the guarding.

The first voice he heard was Frost's. "I say git 'em when they come out no matter what happens tuh Birdie. We kin manage better without her."

"I dunno," came Clay's more hesitant voice. "Lije nor Ulas wouldn't like it, an' we k'ain't afford a split. Besides,

Birdie has got more brains than the lot of us, an' ain't nobody kin han'le them Injuns like she kin."

"Mebbe yo're right, but I git almighty fed up on her high-handed ways. An' I do know we'd better let 'em knife her than fer us tuh let them fellers an' Idy May git away."

"They k'ain't git away," Clay replied. He dropped his voice so that Val couldn't hear anything else he said.

"Well, you sorta take charge here," Frost said presently. "I'll go back home, an' make shore Bug-eye ain't loafin' on the job. We don't want any of 'em sneakin' back in thar fer anythin'."

"Don't be in a hurry, gents," Val spoke from a rod away. "Put yore hands up, before we mow you down."

The outlaws hesitated, cursed bitterly and raised their hands. Val advanced and took their guns. "This certainly is my lucky day," he told them, chuckling. "Git down on yore bellies, an' don't move."

When they were down he got a rope from one of their saddles and tied Frost hand and foot. He sliced enough off the end of the rope to tie Clay's hands behind him, then finished his job by inserting a gag in Frost's mouth and making it tight.

"All right, Clay," he said then, "get up an' climb on yore horse. Make the least fuss and you'll get a bullet right between the shoulders."

"Where you takin' me ?" the fellow growled.

"Just back to Poison Valley," Val smiled.

He had Clay well drilled in his duties before they got back to the gateway of the valley. When they were challenged by Bug-eye it was Clay who answered, and got the guard almost up to them before the fellow saw that anything was amiss.

"Drop the gun," Val ordered ominously, and the glint of steel in his hand enforced the order. Bug-eye lived up to his name at that moment. Forcing Clay to dismount, Val used another lasso rope to truss up both men, and finished by gagging them, and rolling them out of sight.

It had been almost ridiculously easy, and he was confident there was no other man in the valley except Rip, the negro cook. He rode on to the corrals and tied his horses in the shadows. Ten minutes later he knocked on the door of Frost's house.

"Who's thar ?" came Delly's voice. The house was dark.

"Got a message from Frost," Val answered.

Presently the woman came to the door, clutching a blanket around her. "You !" she exclaimed, startled.

"Shush !" he warned. "Don't wake anybody."

"Whar's my husband ?" she asked.

"Right now he's tied up where he won't get into trouble, but he won't be hurt if I get what I want."

"What do you want?"

"I come after horses, food, and ammunition. We've got Birdie, Frost and Clay prisoners, but they'll all be turned loose when we get away."

"Idy May all right?"

"She's all right. You helped her once; you must help her again. That girl needs clothes, and we need some supplies. Can you get them for us?"

"I reckon I kin," the woman said with more spring in her voice than Val had ever heard her use before. He told her what was needed, and she rounded up the articles in a surprisingly short time.

"Mister," she said then, "I reckon you-all jest couldn't take me an' my kids along, could ye? If I could jist git back tuh N'th Ca'liny I wouldn't ever ask fer anything else."

Val had never felt sorrier for a person than he did this pleading woman, who, entirely without her own fault had been transplanted into a land of complete outlawry.

"You've no idee how I hate Frost Satterfield," she said. "Sometimes I reckon I'll jest kill him while he sleeps. I hate 'em all. I jest k'ain't let 'em bring up my kids ter be outlaws like they are."

"Delly, I promise you that if we can get away I'll do my very best to get you and your children away from here," Val promised rashly.

"I don't reckon ye'll make it, but I done all I kin fer ye, so I wish ye good luck," the woman said drearily.

There were only two extra horses in the stable, but Val had no time to try to get more. If Rip had been aroused he knew that he might be in for trouble even yet before he got out. Delly had assured him that he would not be molested by the Indian girls, and she was seeing to it that her mother-in-law didn't leave the house while he was there.

He made the things into three separate rolls and tied them behind saddles. Then, leading three saddle horses he rode out of Poison Valley for what he hoped was the last time. The muffled groans of Clay and Bug-eye assured him that they were still where he had left them.

His problem now was to hide his horses where the Indians would not find them while he went to get his friends. The foot of the mesa was obviously too dangerous, so he took the trail up to the top which he had once traversed with Birdie Satterfield. He found a thick clump of pinon pine less than a mile from Becker's caves where he could conceal his animals, and hurried back to the hideout.

It had taken a long time to accomplish all he had, and the

night was almost gone when he neared the caves. He paused to give the ground owl signal which Bill Gentry knew, and after a moment he was cautiously answered. Presently he scrambled down to where they waited.

"Well," he said jubilantly, "the luck was with us. I've got four horses, and grub enough to last us to Cox's Landing. Call Ida May and Birdie and let's get going."

"I reckon we better git goin' all right, but there's no use tuh call Birdie," Bill Gentry informed glumly, "because she's gone."

CHAPTER XVIII

It took Val a minute to recover from the stunning news. He had banked entirely upon Birdie for their safety. His first reaction was blind anger against the two old men for having permitted her to escape. For the first time in their association he spoke heated words to his old pardner.

"Ease off, young feller," Becker interrupted him, "'twasn't Bill's fault, nor yit mine. If you hadn't made sech a fuss I'd o' broke her damn neck long ago. Now she'll be back here with them Injuns any time."

"It was all my fault," Ida May's voice came from the darkness.

"What happened ?" Val demanded.

"It was so cold there in those caves," the girl said. "Birdie had refused to take part of my blankets. I was shivering with all of them, and I slipped into the cave where she was to put one of the blankets over her if she was asleep. Oh, it was a foolish thing to do. I, of all people should have known how treacherous she is."

"Go on. Let's hear the worst of it," Val said.

"She was awake. She asked me to come close to her. Then, before I knew it she was sticking me with a sharp knife."

"She yelled to us," Bill took up the tale. "Told us she'd kill Ida May if we tried to hold her. She forced the gal outside, or rather we did, when Ida May told her to go ahead an' use her knife. This gal was brave. We dang near had tuh help Birdie force her outside. We simply hadda let Birdie go or that hell-cat would have killed Ida May before our eyes."

"I almost wish she had," the girl sobbed.

Val's anger ebbed. "I'm sorry I spoke like I did," he patted the girl's shoulder consolingly. "I can see how it happened, and it just couldn't be helped. So far, we're just not quite smart enough to deal with Birdie."

"Not ruthless enough, you mean," Ida May corrected.

" She made us stay here while she dragged Ida May tuh the end o' the trail thar, then she slid over the ledge an' disappeared. Time we got thar she was gone in the dark, an' neither of us could find her," Bill explained.

" All I hope is she slips an' breaks a laig 'fore she gits out," Becker said.

Val looked the old outlaw over contemplatively. It would be too bad for Birdie if ever she fell into Becker's hands again.

" Wal, we'd better be pullin' out 'fore Birdie rounds up her savages an' sends 'em in here," Bill said. " We kin shore use them horses yuh got."

" Yuh say you left both Frost an' Clay tied up ? " Becker asked with studied carelessness. " I reckon I'll stay right here an' take a chance on bein' found."

Val read what was in the outlaw's mind. The Satterfields merited anything that happened to them, but Val didn't want to be a party to their cold-blooded murder.

" It wouldn't do you any good, Becker," he said, coldly. " Clay will have been turned loose long ago and you could never find Frost."

In the end Becker went with them, although growling that he could do himself no good by such action.

" Jack Cradlebaugh left us, and you know what happened to him," Val reminded.

" An' I reckon yuh coulda turned him in fer a reward if he'd stuck around," Becker retorted.

" If you come with us you're free to go any time you want," Val said curtly. " We're not interested in your quarrel with the law."

" Reckon I wuz wrong tuh say that," Becker rumbled.

They reached the horses in safety, and were still confronted with the problem of getting off the butte and getting headed for the Colorado. There was a pinkish glow in the sky which warned them that it would be daylight in half an hour. Becker told them that there was only one other way to get off the butte beside the trail to Poison Valley. That was to cross the butte in a diagonal direction to where it sloped off into a deep canyon.

" Then if they know we're up here they can cut us off by guarding two places," Val said.

" On horseback," Becker confirmed.

They crossed the plateau at a hard gallop, sending surprised bunches of cattle galloping off into the timber as they went. Val was pleased to note that Ida May was a good rider. The girl's face was serious but not frightened. She had faced perils before, and she could face them again.

It was a race against time. How long would it be before

someone liberated Clay Satterfield and he got back to free Frost and arouse the others ?

They came suddenly to what appeared to be another break-off of the butte—only this one was abrupt. Becker flung himself from his horse, and handed the reins to Val.

" Foller me," he directed, " but don't git too close."

He went on afoot, and the others followed warily. Presently Bill Gentry handed the reins of his horse to Ida May, and he went on ahead, enabling them to keep more distance between Becker and the horses.

They had turned to the right, and suddenly they found themselves looking down into a deep canyon, which Ida May informed Val was almost opposite Poison Valley. Unlike that depression, however, this one was narrow at the top, and wide at the bottom. Between the two was a narrow plateau not more than two miles wide. She nodded confirmation when Val guessed that they were closer to the outlaw stronghold than they had been any time that morning.

" You could ride back little more than a mile and see Delly's garden," she told him.

" Want to do it," he queried smilingly.

She shivered. " I never want to see it again, and I never want to see any of them, unless it is Delly and her children."

They started the sharp descent through rocks and timber ; always keeping the figure of Bill Gentry in sight, and they were frequently halted for minutes at a time by Bill's signal. With time so precious, Val thought fretfully, there was little sense in Becker being so cautious.

They reached what seemed to be the bottom of the canyon. High slopes towered above them, shutting off their view, but there was a well-defined trail at the bottom over which hundreds of stolen animals had no doubt been driven. The canyon was too crooked for them to at any time see more than a few hundred yards ahead. Bill's upraised hand kept stopping them more and more often.

Suddenly while they were waiting for Bills come-ahead sign the silence was shattered by a single wild yell. Val didn't wait to get Bill's permission, but tossed the reins of the horse he was leading to Ida May and spurred forward.

Just around the first bend he came upon the two old timers. They were standing over the body of a dead Indian, whose skull had been shattered by the butt of Becker's rifle. The fierce old outlaw chief was gazing on down the canyon.

" The critter seen me before I could nail him, an' let out that whoop," he exclaimed apologetically. " We better wait right here a few minutes tuh see if his war-whoop brings any more Injuns. If it don't I reckon we kin rattle our hocks."

Val dismounted and hurriedly dragged the dead Indian out of sight before Ida May arrived. The girl only paled slightly when they told her what had happened.

"Wal, I reckon the critter musta been alone, so let's be goin'," Becker said. He and Gentry now climbed aboard their horses, and set as fast a pace as the steep nature of the canyon permitted. Val realized that only the caution of the two older men had saved them from disaster. That lone Indian might have held them up for hours.

Two or three miles farther on they came to where the canyon forked in three directions. The face of another mighty mesa loomed before them, but one canyon ran north, and another south. They had been travelling straight west. They turned south.

It was not really a canyon in which they soon found themselves but merely a division between two immense plateaus, and was almost level. At the end of five miles they emerged on to the edge of the badlands which lay between them and the Colorado.

The country ahead of them looked almost level, but in reality it was a series of bare, round ridges with deep washes between them, where the erosions of centuries had worn out deep gullies and washes. All of them ran down to the Dirty Devil like the bare white ribs of a cadaver—and all of them had to be crossed. Each time they rode over a ridge they might be seen from miles away.

"There ye air," Bull Becker told them. "Ninety miles o' that, an' you'll reach Cox's Landin'. Happens tuh be the right kind o' people thar ye'll be safe. Happens tuh be a gang o' Satterfield outlaws, an' ye'd jest as well ride right back tuh Poison Valley. Ye don't wanta look fer no he'p from Rube Cox. He's the neutralest hombre ever tuh a chaw o' terbacker."

"Well, folks, I guess we'd just as well make a run for it," Val decided. "We'll only be giving them time to organize, if we delay."

Ninety miles! It would be plain hell merely crossing that country, but if they had to dodge pursuit, or fight their way through it would be worse.

It was already beginning to get hot, but they put their mounts to a mile-eating trot wherever they could. Most of the canyons were too steep for them to go straight up or down, so that they had to angle, and frequently zigzag. Their progress seemed pitifully slow, yet the mesa was beginning to recede in a blue haze by the time they stopped to let their horses rest. Already it was evident it would have been impossible to make the journey on foot.

They stopped in a clump of scraggly brush that afforded

trifling amount of shade, and allowed their mounts to graze on the dead sparse grass. There was no water, and the animals had to be watched constantly lest they suddenly strike out for the distant river.

Bill Gentry went back on the highest ridge to watch the back-trail. He was gone not longer than twenty minutes when he returned hurriedly.

"They're after us," he reported. "I saw seven or eight horsemen cross a ridge not three miles back, an' there's smoke signals goin' up all over the country, clear back tuh the breaks."

Val and the girl looked at the two old men questioningly. Two men could not have been more unlike. Bill Gentry was as tough and hard physically as the former outlaw, but he was essentially sweet-tempered and kindly. Bull Becker, on the other hand, was as fierce and unrelenting as any eagle that had ever flown the sky. They had one thing in common—courage.

"They're bound tuh sight us in another half-hour then, whether we go or stay," Becker said. "Chances air they'll press us hard with their horses, an' git us tuh make a stand if they kin, while them savages cut between us an' the river, an' git in behind."

"If they keep pressin' us the rest o' the day our horses'll be too fagged tuh go any further, an' likely the Injuns'll git ahead of us anyway to-morrow," Bill, agreed. "Bull, what do you say you an' me stays behind an' gives 'em a battle while the young 'uns go on?"

"Suits me," Becker said. "What I want mostly is a shot at Cross-eyed Birdie."

"I don't like it," Val said flatly. "If it's the only way to save Ida May I'd do it, but I don't think it'll help. They'd see us, and some of them would keep after us while the rest stopped to clean up you two."

"If any of you stay behind I'll stay, too," the girl stated briefly. "I only ask one favour. If there isn't any way out I'd like to die while some of you are still alive."

"We'll see to it," Bill Gentry said gruffly.

All of them realized the precariousness of their position. The men were grateful for the girl's courage, and it made it seem more worth while to die, if need be, in her defence.

"If I hadn't let Birdie outwit me none of us would be in danger now," Ida May said contritely. "I'm to blame for everything."

They assured her that she was not.

They got on the reluctant horses and climbed the next ridge. The animals were tired and thirsty. They could not be induced to anything faster than a slow walk without the use

of spurs. Before they had gone a mile they realized that they had been seen. The next time their enemies appeared the distance had been decreased perceptibly, and the enemy were riding fast. They were close enough for the fugitives to recognize Birdie's red shirt.

There was little talking. It was Val who set the pace, because his judgment of horseflesh was sound. He didn't believe that the outlaws would attack before dark. He tried to set a pace fast enough that the flanking Indians would not be able to gain any in the race; yet easy enough that the horses would not wilt completely under the hot afternoon sun.

They could soon count eight people in the pursuing party. One of them was plainly recognizable as Birdie. Quanney was another. The others were undoubtedly the three Satterfield brothers and Bug-eye, Brandy, and Seven-up Sorensen.

Val wondered if his squeamishness in not killing the three men he had taken prisoner was not a mistake. With those three out of the way the others could have been stood off. Yet it was the Indians who still constituted the real menace. They had suffered losses, but there was still probably fifteen of them besides Quanney—far too many to fight off.

Their foes now separated into two parties to flank them if they deviated one way or the other. Val had secured some ammunition, and each man now had a rifle and a six-gun. They could give an account of themselves in a fight, but if they ever stopped they would be surrounded—and so far as they knew there was no possibility of help.

There were times that afternoon when some of the outlaws were almost within rifle range, but they got no closer, and no shot was fired. Bull Becker constantly waited for a chance to get a shot at one of the Satterfields, but they didn't quite give him the chance he wanted.

When darkness came at last it was all they could do to keep their weary mounts moving. Only one thing was in their favour. From an hour before sunset dark, heavy clouds had been hovering over the western horizon, and they seemed to be gathering and advancing. Once in a while they caught the low ominous growl of thunder. There would probably be no moon. Anyway, the intense heat was broken.

"Once them cloudbursts ketches us in a washout it'll be too bad," Becker said. "I've seen her rain so hard every gully was bank deep."

"If it stops us it'll stop them," Val retorted. "Let 'er rain."

An hour later it began to rain. The sky seemed to open and the water was dumped out. They dared not stay in a wash, so they had to stand and take it on top of one of the

ridges. Val draped a blanket around Ida May's shoulders, but it was quickly soaked. Lightning flashed and revealed rivulets of water even on top of the bare ridges. The horses turned their rumps to the storm and waited with heads hanging to the ground.

In five minutes the whole party was chilled, but in general they were thankful for the storm. Certainly it couldn't make their position any worse.

"Wonder how Birdie likes it," Bill Gentry called out as soon as the storm abated enough that he could made himself heard. At that moment there came a terrific, jagged flash of lightning that for a moment illuminated the ridge below them like day. There, not two hundred yards below them were four horsemen, likewise with their backs to the storm. On either side of them they could hear the roaring sound of running water tearing down the washes. They were marooned for the time being upon this bare, narrow ridge with at least four of their foes. And it was certain to become lighter before the water went down enough for them to cross.

CHAPTER XIX

A MINUTE after that blinding flash of lightning the fugitives were engulfed in stygian darkness. Val put out his hand to touch the girl's arm comfortingly. Not once had she uttered a word of complaint, despite the incredible hardships she had endured. He felt her cold, wet hand placed over his reassuringly for a moment, and then it was withdrawn.

Another flash of lightning, farther away, and less brilliant, did not afford enough light to reveal their enemies—but it did reveal an empty saddle close at hand. Bull Becker was gone!

Scarcely had Val's subdued exclamation left his lips when the blare of a rifle pierced through the steady patter of the rain. Hoarse cries. More shots. Powder flashes criss-crossed the black page of night.

Val dared not leave Ida May lest he lose her completely, and he couldn't take her with him into battle. He heard Bill Gentry's horse moving toward the conflict. In the darkness a stray shot might reach anybody. He got the girl's bridle and led her horse as close as they could get to the raging torrent in the gully bottom. The gun flashes revealed that the Satterfield bunch were fleeing on down the ridge. Soon the firing ceased altogether.

The rain stopped suddenly. A queer unusual sound; that of torrents of water tearing down previously dry gulches

filled the air. As the clouds lifted a few stars began to appear. The air was damp and chilly. In another hour the freshets would have gone down enough to make crossing possible.

Val heard Bill Gentry calling his name, and answered. "What happened?" he demanded when Gentry joined them.

"Looks like Becker went off his nut again," Bill said. "I don't know what became of him. They may have got him for all I know, but I stumbled over a dead man—it was Frost Satterfield."

"Oh!" Ida May exclaimed.

"So he got one of 'em?" Val mused.

"Dunno whether I shoulda done it or not, but I drug the body over an' throwed it in the flood. If Frost's bones are ever found they'll be somewhere down in the Colorado."

The thing gave them a strange feeling. No one cared to talk. Death had dogged their footsteps ever since their escape, and they knew it was not yet shaken off.

It began to grow lighter; the rumble of the rushing waters decreased. Still there was no sign of Bull Becker, although they found his horse. They couldn't afford to wait for the ex-outlaw. That summer cloudburst had been providential, and they could not neglect the opportunity it afforded them, even though it meant the abandonment of one of their party.

"I'll stay an' wait fer him," Bill Gentry had volunteered, but the other two vetoed it. They owed Becker nothing, and if he had got into trouble it was his own fault.

They forced the reluctant animals into the receding flood and got across. The water was little more than knee deep, but the sucking sand underneath gripped the animal's feet like mire. The cooling off had done the horses good, but they had to cross one freshet after another. Soon they found only trickles of water, but each gully was filled with that sticky, stinking mud. Thirsty as their animals were they could not drink the thick liquid in the washes. Later, there would be depressions holding water which had settled, and which could be drunk.

There was little use to manœuvre now, since their tracks were plainly visible in the mud. They could only hope to beat as straight a course as possible to the big river, and hope that the storm had delayed the Indians.

With morning they found a low pinnacle on a ridge which afforded shelter for the horses while the two men climbed to its top to survey the back trail. They still had water in the goatskin bag Bill had captured, and food enough for the circumstances. According to the best estimate they could make they were not over thirty miles from the Colorado. Their horses were in far better shape than they had been the evening before.

There was no question but that the mud in the gullies would slow up the Indians who were on foot. Their chief danger was from Birdie and her men, and their chief worry the fate of Bull Becker. They rested for an hour, but still saw no sign of pursuit. Fatigue had laid a heavy hand on all of them, but there was no use to think of rest until their journey was over.

They found Ida May seated upon a rock watching the horses. Her face was drawn, and there were circles under her eyes, but she managed a smile of greeting.

"Feel able to go on?" Val asked.

"Oh, yes; I'm rested and feel fine," she declared.

"Well, there's no sign of Becker or anybody else, so we'd as well ride on," Val said.

"Oh, I hope they haven't caught him," she cried.

"Don't worry; that old galoot kin take keer of himself," Bill said. "Anyway, he's got too much sense to let Birdie or them Injuns git a hold of him alive."

Leading the extra horse behind them they struck out on the last lap of the journey. They discovered that the storm had struck only across a certain belt, and they were soon beyond the mud. The main idea now was to get as far as they could before the heat became intolerable.

After a couple of hours, seeing no sign of pursuit, they slowed down to a jog-trot. The conformation of the country had now changed; and the slope was south-west rather than east. The canyons were deeper, and they knew they were approaching the Colorado itself. They missed Bull Becker sorely, for he could have guided them to their destination with the least possible loss of time. But once they were down into one of those mighty canyons they had no fear of being cut off at least until they reached their destination.

There was a dull, booming roar that at first sounded like a distant stampede of a herd of cattle, but which presently grew louder than the noise any cattle could make. It began to sound like the incessant boom! boom! boom! of dozens of gigantic drums. It was the river!

Ahead of them huge parapets of red sandstone swept majestically, tier upon tier. They were on the other side of the river, and looked to be only two or three miles away. All one could see in any direction was red sandstone.

They came out suddenly upon a flat-topped bench, and realized with a thrill, not entirely due to relief, that they were at last in the canyon of the mighty Colorado itself. There it was—the great mud coloured river, caught forever in the grip of the channel it had forged for itself. Scarce a hundred miles below was the beginning of the greatest canyon on earth.

"There she roars," Bill Gentry said, "She ain't in no mild

mood to-day either. I wish I knew whether that crossin' was above us or below."

"We'd better be findin' out," Val said. "Haven't you ever been here before, Ida May?"

"Not that I can remember. In fact I know I haven't. But I do know that the Satterfields often come here, and they must have friends. I—I'm frightened."

"You're all in," Val told her. "You've got to, get some place where you can get some decent food and some sleep."

The difficulty they experienced getting off the bench indicated that they had not come by the route used by the outlaws. It gave cause for worry, lest they had been beaten to the crossing after all.

Finally, just before they reached the river, they saw a triangular cove up-stream, and near the upper end was a little cluster of buildings.

"This man Cox may be friendly tuh the Satterfields, but he also has to keep on good terms with other people. He'll not dare tuh let them bandits come in here an' take over his place," Bill stated.

"You're right," Val agreed. "Anyway, we're headed for Cox's Landin', an' if we have to take the place over ourselves we will."

They rounded the point of a massive bluff and were soon in the little triangular cove upon which the man Cox had long ago established his trading post and ferry. It was a mighty relief to know that they were once more in the channels of civilization, no matter how remote.

Despite Ida May's bravery her face was ashen from fatigue, and her eyes heavily shadowed and dull. Val was glad to see new hope spring into her eyes. Everything about her was suddenly tense and eager. He realized that until they brought Cox's Landing into sight that she had not dared let herself hope. He reached over and patted her hand.

"Everything is going to be all right," he assured her.

She turned toward him gratefully. "Oh, I hope so," she said in a low voice. "But I can't forget that poor Ezra Cupples was murdered by those people just when we thought we were perfectly safe."

"It won't happen this time," he said. "Cupples was only one man, and he may have got careless because he thought he was safe. This is a quiet enough looking place."

The trading post consisted of a row of cabins backed against the bluff, with one larger building slightly out in front of the others. The ferry, moored to its cables, was a few hundred yards down the river bank. Here was no regular road; only the converging point of half a dozen desert trails over which roamed only hardy cowboys, miners, outlaws and Indians.

Val was secretly a little uneasy as he saw three or four blanketed Indians lounging about the trading post, yet they didn't seem the type of Quanney's young savages.

They stopped in front of the main trading post, and Val helped the girl out of the saddle. He felt a pang of pity for the great weariness which no effort on her part could conceal. He was dead tired himself in spite of an iron physique, and a body that he had trained to endure hardships.

The blanketed Indians stared silently. The whole place seemed unnaturally quiet. As they stepped into the low-roofed building, heavy with the odour of musty groceries, a man rearranging goods upon a shelf looked around and came toward them. Val, accustomed to overlooking no detail, wondered why the man had become so active in rearranging that particular spot, when the dust on the shelves indicated that the most of the articles upon them had not been moved for months.

"Well, folks, what can I do for you?" the man smirked.

He was rather an odd looking character with a big bald head surrounded by a fringe of reddish hair. His eyes were the smallest Val had ever seen in a human head, and his nose was a mere blob upon which was a growth of coarse, reddish hairs. His mouth was slack and discoloured with tobacco, and his big shoulders were so muscular that at first glance he seemed badly stooped, almost deformed.

"You Mr. Cox?" Val asked.

"That's me. Rube Cox. Which way yuh from?"

"We were headin' for the Escalante, but we lost our outfits, and headed back this way because we heard it was the closest post."

"Well, ain't another tradin' post closer'n a hundred an' fifty miles, I reckon. What can I do for you?"

"First, we had a hard time and we need rest. We'd like to get a hot meal, and then we want a room for the young lady. She's very tired."

"Looks it. Fact is, yuh all do," Cox grinned. "Come with me."

As he led the way to the back, half a dozen dirty, ragged brown urchins scampered out of the way. Cox caught a twelve-year-old girl by the ear and gave it a tweak.

"Hustle over to number four cabin, an' sweep it out for this lady—and be sure you git it clean," he commanded.

The girl grinned, and scampered.

Cox halted in front of the largest cabin and bellowed, "Mary!"

A slatternly woman, not much more than half the age of the proprietor, slouched forward with a ten months old baby astride her hip.

"Mrs. Cox," the man said importantly, "we have guests. They're hungry. Fix 'em a good meal."

"All right," the woman said indifferently.

"Now maybe you men would like a little drink while the wife's fixin' dinner," Cox suggested.

"Right fine idee," Bill Gentry approved.

"I could stand one too, but I'd like to get our horses some grain first," Val said.

"Ain't got no grain—'twould break a man packin' it in here, but there's a fenced pasture yuh kin turn 'em in."

"That'll be fine," Val agreed. After all the horses had to have feed and rest.

A big glass of whisky made both men feel better. An understanding look passed between them, and Val explained their situation frankly to the ferryman. After all they would have to remain there for a time at least, and the Satterfields might arrive at any moment. It was better to lay their cards on the table.

"The Satterfields, eh?" Cox rumbled. "I've heard of 'em. Possible I've ferried 'em across the river, but out here I make it a point not to ask questions of nobody. It just don't pay."

"I can see that," Val admitted.

"Well, you jest rest easy. If anybody comes lookin' fer you I'll tell 'em no such people have been here. All you need do is keep out of sight."

"All right. Can you arrange to get us what supplies we need, and be ready to ferry us across the river an hour before daybreak in the morning?"

"Sure can," Cox agreed. "An' there's the signal yore breakfast is ready."

They were too tired and hungry to bother about Mrs. Cox's ideas of sanitation, and there was certainly abundant food. Before the meal was over Ida May was nodding like a sleepy child. Val felt an impulse to pick her up and carry her over to her cabin, but he restrained it, and merely held her arm until they reached the door where the grinning Edith stood waiting to welcome them.

"I know I'll be asleep before I get my boots off," Ida May smiled.

"That's all right. Don't worry about a thing till we call you to breakfast to-morrow morning."

"Are you sure everything will be all right?" she asked anxiously. "I'd much rather go back to Poison Valley now than have—what happened at Tompkin Spring happen—to you."

"It won't," he assured her. "Remember, there's two of us, and we'll take no chances. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Val and Bill had been assigned a cabin a short distance away from the one occupied by Ida May. Both men had been without sleep so long that it was physically impossible to remain awake much longer; yet neither one wanted to take a chance on being surprised by the Satterfields.

It seemed incredible to believe that the outlaws would dare make an attack at a place which, though isolated, was well known, and was too close to the Satterfield hang-out for them to risk attracting too much attention. On the other hand they stood to lose their safety anyway if the fugitives finally escaped. Most dangerous fact of all, perhaps, was the absolutely unpredictable nature of Birdie Satterfield.

On the whole, however, Val and Bill were inclined to agree that it was more likely the Satterfields would lie in wait somewhere, and try to pick them up as they tried to leave.

"You git yore boots off," Bill said. "Sleep as free as yuh like. I'll do some snoozin', too, but I'm takin' a walk first. If they do make a raid they won't pick up both of us at the same time."

"I know there's no use to argue with you, you old cuss," Val smiled. "Go ahead. I'm gittin' some shut-eye."

The puncher was asleep before he knew it. It was pitch dark inside the cabin when he awoke. For some reason he had a panicky inclination to yell. He caught his breath, and suppressed the impulse, but his limbs were trembling. He had the feeling that something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

After a moment he felt cautiously for the six-gun he had left under his pillow. It was still there. He sat up and placing the gun beside him silently drew on his boots. He was sure now that there was no one else in the room. He walked over to the door and started to open it. It didn't open. He tried again, hard this time. There was no doubt about it—that door was locked from the outside!

Strangely enough Val felt a certain relief. Things could have been worse. He still had his gun. That meant that he had been locked in by somebody other than the Satterfields. It seemed clear, however, that Cox had treacherously locked him in with the idea in view of holding him for the Satterfields. If the man thought he could be held that easy he was mistaken.

Then another thought brought all his apprehensions back again. Ida May! Had they got hold of the girl and taken her away while he slept? He could see plenty of reasons why Cox might have been willing to let them sneak the girl away, yet not molest him.

He had to get out of there! He lighted a match and found a smoky lantern. Every window in the cabin was

too small to permit the passage of a man's body. He turned to the door. It obviously was padlocked on the outside. Coolly enough Val placed the muzzle of his gun against the wood, and fired five rapid shots. He reloaded rapidly, listening while he worked. There was complete silence. He fired three more shots; then threw his weight against the weakened bolt which held the hasp. At the third effort the bolt broke loose and the door flew open.

Those eight shots should have roused somebody, but only complete silence greeted his ears. He thrust in three fresh cartridges and ran toward the cabin where he had left Ida May. The door stood open, and the girl was gone!

CHAPTER XX

VAL FELT murderous resentment against Rube Cox for his treachery. He ran over to the man's house and yelled, "Cox, come out here."

"Who is it? What you want?" a plaintive voice bleated.

"Come out here, or I'm comin' in after you," Val shouted.

Someone struck a light, and then Rube Cox appeared in a nightgown which flopped about his ankles. "What you wakin' us up this time o' night for?" he demanded.

"Don't plead innocence to me," Val rasped. "You locked me in that cabin so the Satterfields could steal the girl that was with us. I want to know where she is."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Cox declared. "I went to bed at nine o'clock, an' you woke me up."

"You damned liar, you padlocked that door," Val charged.

"Nope. There was a padlock hangin' outside, that I use when there's nobody stayin' in it, but it wasn't me used it."

Val realized that he was getting nowhere. Cox might be guilty as hell, and probably was; but there was no way to prove it. The fact was that after all their efforts the Satterfields had stolen the girl with ridiculous ease, and were perhaps already well on their way back to Poison Valley with her.

They would not get there! Something would have to stop them. Bill Gentry! The Satterfields surely could not have arrived without Bill seeing them. The fact that he hadn't woke Val up indicated that he might be busy following them. It was a slender chance, but Val wondered if he should leave the place before Bill had a chance to report. He could, however, get ready to move. He told Cox to get dressed, and the man didn't attempt to argue with the

sixgun Val held. When the bald-headed man got his clothes on they went to look at the saddles. Only the one that had been adjusted for Ida May was missing. It filled Val with nausea and despair to think that he had slept soundly while the worn-out girl was being kidnapped from under his very nose. He didn't hold it to be any excuse that he was completely exhausted by the ordeals of the past few days.

They drove in the horses, and Val saddled the black animal which Bull Becker had abandoned during the cloudburst. It was in better condition than the rest, and far superior to anything Cox had. He forced Cox to accompany him out toward the upper end of the cove, and then sent the man back; pretending that he had taken the action to make sure the fellow didn't try to shoot him in the back.

All sense of panic had left Val now. Action had suppled his stiffened muscles. His brain was functioning, and he was alert.

He rode on only a short distance before turning to one side and leaving his horse. Then, hugging the side of the cliff he ran back toward the post, arriving there almost as quickly as Cox.

There was a light in the man's house, and Val slipped through the shadows until he reached the rear of the building, and then worked his way along the wall to a window of the room where Cox could now be heard talking.

"It's nothin' to us, remember," the man was saying. "We can't antagonize the Satterfields. For years they've been my best customers, and Cross-eyed Birdie would wipe us out like a hutch of young rabbits if she thought we'd help these people."

"Why didn't they take the two men, too?" a woman's voice asked.

"I reckon it was lucky Birdie herself wasn't along or they would," Cox answered. "I told Ulas I couldn't afford tuh have no trouble here, an' the old man was hidin' out anyway. I convinced him they'd try to foller the gal, an' if they wanted to ketch 'em all they'd have to do was lay an ambush. I was right, too, fer that young feller is ridin' right into it."

"I figgered he was plumb in love with that gal the way he kep' a-lookin' at her," the woman sighed.

"Well, I'm glad he went after her, 'cause Ulas said that if Birdie herself was anywhere close she'd prob'ly come in here after him."

"Well, it's nothin' to us, Rube. Come on to bed," the woman said sleepily.

Val went back to the cabin where he had slept, to consider. His inclinations cried out to pursue the outlaws clear back

to Poison Valley if necessary, but what he had just heard warned him it would be ill-advised, and there was probably a better way.

He had heard Birdie talk about her youngest brother-in-law, Ulysses, whom they called Ulas. Apparently he and some other outlaws had been waiting here to intercept them if they came this way. It was likely they had been in hiding across the river, and that Cox had ferried them across when it got dark. If he knew Birdie Satterfield at all her vengeance would not be sated until she got hold of him and Bill as well as Ida May. That meant that as soon as the two parties met she would lead them back to Cox's Landing—unless he and Bill walked blindly into their ambush.

He wished he knew what had become of Bill but there was little use to hunt for him. Val had now decided to take the chance of waiting for the Satterfields to come back.

He went down to the ferry. There was a row boat tied close at hand. He went back and hammered on Cox's door.

"Who's that?" the trader demanded irritably. Val kept hammering, however, until the fellow shuffled forward in his nightshirt.

"You again?" Cox exclaimed. "I thought you left."

"I came back," Val said crisply. "Make your family get dressed, pronto. You're all movin' across the river—for safety."

"Say, look here——" Cox began to splutter.

"And you look here," Val cut in, jabbing the end of his gun against the man's protruding stomach. "Get busy. You've got just ten minutes to get your whole outfit down to the ferry—and this persuader won't be four feet from you any time."

"The ferry? But what's happen——"

"Git dressed. The Satterfields'll be here anytime, and they're goin' to run into a surprise. You and your family will only get hurt if I let you stay here."

"My, my," the trader gasped, and made a dive for his pants.

Val's time limit was ample for the Cox family to get on board the ferry. Cox started to shove off. He hesitated when he saw Val by his side. "You—ain't goin'?" the fellow queried.

"Sure I am. I'm bringin' the ferry back," Val told him grimly.

The ferry creaked across on its cables. Val asked Cox if he had a boat on that side, and was assured that there was none. He looked around, however, to make sure. It was not likely that Cox would leave a boat around where it might be used to beat him out of a fee. With a warning

to Cox to keep his family out of sight Val shoved off, and was soon back on the other side. He anchored the ferry, and went up to the store. It was locked, of course, and he didn't bother about it. He went into Cox's house, and quickly discovered a sawed-off shotgun—apparently the only weapon the trader possessed. There was also a quantity of shells. Val could not complain of the size of his arsenal. For the moment he was in complete command of Cox's Landing.

He had hidden his horse well. If need be he could probably reach the animal unseen. In the meantime there was nothing to do but wait. There was a deep, settled conviction in his mind that the Satterfields would come.

It was nearer dawn than he had thought. It seemed incredibly still around the trading post; the thunder of the river only seeming to add to the grim and bitter silence of the surrounding desert. The colours of the great cliff began to come out like the changing colours of a kaleidoscope as they caught the oblique rays of the sun. Another hot, desert day was beginning.

Val went into the house and found food. He carried a supply of food and water out to the brush where he had left his horse, then worked his way back to a series of boulders against the bluff, some three hundred yards from the building. He found that he could make his way back to his horse behind the concealment of the rocks and sparse, scattered clumps of brush without being exposed for more than a few seconds at any time. His position was as sound strategically as it could be made.

Thus far he had been busy, but waiting gave him time to worry and wonder about Ida May and Bill. What was happening to them? Was he being a fool to sit here waiting while both of them might even now be on their way to Poison Valley and a fate to which death would be the richest favour.

He thought of Jack Cradlebaugh. Bull Becker had mercifully ended his suffering with a bullet, but there might be no one to show like mercy to old Bill if he got caught. As for Ida May, she still faced the alternative of Clay Satterfield, or Quanney's foul young savages. Yet he had made his plans and wasted far too much time now to abandon them.

He watched the shadows creep slowly up the side of the huge cliffs through which the Colorado beat its furious and frenzied way. Each inch that the shadow line lessened might well mark the approach of his friends to disaster. They would be wondering what he was doing about it, and here he sat doing nothing except watch shadows.

Then, suddenly, he saw horsemen emerge on to the top

of a long, fingerlike ridge sweeping down from the upper end of the cove. He stiffened to attention as they drifted into view, one by one. There were eight altogether. As they came nearer his guess that the one who rode so imperiously in lead was Cross-eyed Birdie was verified. He recognized her husband, and the outlaw called Brandy, but the rest were strangers to him. It was not Lije Satterfield, but a younger man who rode by Birdie's side. It was not hard to suppose that this was Ulas, and the men who had taken Ida May away that night.

He watched with narrowed eyes as they rode up to the buildings. He could put a bullet through any one of them he chose, and he wondered how Bull Becker would have reacted to that chance. He knew that the woman's life would not be worth a nickel.

He heard them call loudly to Cox, then some of them dismounted and went into the house, while others inspected the lock which he had broken in making his escape.

Then, above the thunder of the river drifted the notes of a horn, blown, of course, by Rube Cox as a call for someone to bring him his own ferry. The situation was becoming hotter than a desert day. Birdie and the two Satterfields were conferring. As yet they knew knowing of Val's presence. Presently Val saw them send two of the men down to the ferry. They had considerable trouble getting it under way, and they handled it awkwardly. Birdie remounted her horse and sat in the yard while the other men searched the buildings.

If only she had been a man! One couldn't deal with a woman, even of her kind, as she deserved unless one were a Bull Becker. But Val had chosen his course. Ida May would probably be taken back to Poison Valley, and he would not again be able to get her out until the strength of the Satterfield clan was broken—and that could be only here and now.

"Hi Birdie," he called out loudly, "are you folks looking for something?"

The woman's reaction was explosive. "He's over there?" she screamed excitedly. "Go get him!"

Her shouts drew the men outside. But it was characteristic of the Satterfields for Lije to order Brandy, and the two strange outlaws not on the ferry, to go after the enemy. They were plainly reluctant. They had reason to remember what had happened to Frost Satterfield, Apache Tom and others. But Birdie had spurred behind the house, along with Lije and Ulas. Val saw the three outlaws look toward the place he had called out from, and then back toward the buildings.

"Git goin'. Fetch him," a voice commanded them harshly. The three, drawing their guns, separated as much as they could and trotted forward.

It seemed unbelievable; this thing that was taking place. Not knowing what to expect the Satterfields were driving three of their own men out to reconnoitre.

Cox's Landing had not been planned with a view to defence. The buildings stood well out on an open flat with the river as one background; the bluff, footed with clumps of mesquite broken ledges, and loose boulders composing the other. So long as Val commanded the foot of the bluff the people in the post were completely cut off, except by way of the river—and the ferry was just touching ground on the other side of the river.

Val waited until the three outlaws were within fifty feet of where he knelt concealed.

"Put up your hands, boys, before I mow you down," he called out them.

They were between the devil and the deep sea. They knew that if they turned back, or raised their hands they would be shot down by the implacable Satterfields. They had but one alternative—to rush toward their hidden foe, and hope that they would be lucky enough to reach shelter. They hesitated but a moment, then ran forward, shooting as they ran. The nearest man was not twenty feet away when Val's six-gun went into action. The man stumbled and fell forward on his face. A slug struck the rock in front of Val and zoomed just over his head. The second outlaw suddenly threw up both hands; his spinal column arched inward; he made three or four high, uncertain steps and collapsed.

The man Brandy was the only one left. "Don't shoot, don't shoot," he was almost blubbering. "I'll help you."

Val made magic shift from his six-gun to Cox's sawed-off shotgun. As the man dived behind the rock column Val pressed the end of the weapon against his body. He almost pressed the trigger, but the beseeching look on the fellow's face stayed his finger.

"I'll not try tuh trick yuh," Brandy babbled. "Do yuh see what they done? They made us charge across here, the devils, an' they'd have killed us if we'd stopped. Jest let me live long enough tuh git a shot at her, damn her."

"If I let you live you'll put a bullet in my back the first chance yuh git. Why should I take that chance?" Val asked coldly.

"But I won't. I want to git away from 'em Gawd, man, that woman has gone crazy. Think what they done tuh Bull Becker, an' tuh Jack Cradlebaugh. She's worse

than them Injuns she's throwed in with. I don't dare take a chance on her gittin' mad an' turnin' me over to 'em. I kin help yuh," the man pleaded, his short, reddish beard jiggling as he talked.

"Maybe. I'm not so sure of you. Cradlebaugh wanted to git away, too, but he quit in a pinch."

"Gimme a chance, please," the man begged. He turned his back on Val and faced the cabins. "Listen, you dirty Satterfields," he yelled. "Can you hear me? This is Brandy talkin', you murderin' rats. I'm through with you. I'm throwin' in with Heaton, an' if yuh don't like it come an' git me yourselves. He began a blasphemous tirade that was ended as the Satterfields themselves began to sprinkle the rocks with bullets. Because they dared not show themselves openly none of the shots came close.

Brandy looked up at Val with a hideous grin. "Now I done it," he said. "If Birdie ever ketches me after that I'll git worse than Cradlebaugh did."

"Right. But I'm still not trustin' you. How good a shot are you with a rifle?"

"Purty good. Why?"

"Give me your six-gun, and you take this rifle. Be careful which way it points, because I'll drop you the second it even starts to point in my direction. Now let me see how good you are. Cox and the others are about to start that ferry back."

Brandy accepted the rifle eagerly, took a rest, and fired. It was long range, and Val hadn't expected him to hit anything more than the ferry itself, but whether by accident or design the first shot caused a man to stagger. Both he and the other outlaw dived for shelter, while Rube Cox leaped into the water and splashed hurriedly back to his family, which had gathered on the bank. Cox stopped only long enough to hastily anchor the ferry before it got clear away; then he and his brood disappeared. Brandy continued to bombard the ferry until Val stopped him.

"By golly, I got one of 'em," Brandy chuckled. "You wait; if they show in sight I'll lay 'em both out. But how do we get out off here?"

"Maybe we don't," Val said grimly. "Tell me what happened. What've they done with Ida May?"

"Clay's got her. We was camped back at the first water, waitin' fer dark tuh come in after you, when Bogart, that feller you shot a while ago, came in tuh tell us you'd got in. Ulas an' the others were waitin' fer you all the time. Word had been sent to 'em as soon as you busted out o' the valley."

"Didn't overlook a thing, did they?"

"Not Birdie. I tell yuh, Heaton, after what you done

to her, burnin' her house, gettin' Idy May away, an' everything, she'd wipe out the hull Satterfield tribe if need be tuh turn you over to her Injuns."

"Where are them same Injuns?" Val demanded.

"They won't come in here. 'Fraid they'll run across the soldiers huntin' 'em, or some o' their own people who don't like their ways. But they ain't fur away, an' that cuss Quanney, is at the camp with Clay Satterfield an' the gal. Only other man there is Seven-up Sorensen. If she agrees tuh marry Clay, Sorensen'll marry'em. If she don't Quanney gits to take her back to his young bucks. Them's Birdie's orders."

"Didn't you see anything of Bill Gentry?" Val asked.

"No, I didn't. I wondered where he was."

For the first time Val really dared to hope. If the outlaws hadn't caught Bill he would have been back here had not more urgent matters intervened. Even now Bill was probably keeping an eye upon the camp where the girl was being detained.

Suddenly the situation was far from hopeless. Birdie's lust for vengeance had brought her back here with seven men. She had mismanaged badly. Of the seven men one had deserted, two were dead, and two could not cross the river before dark. Birdie herself and her husband and brother-in-law were surrounded, and couldn't possibly leave the post before dark.

"What about Bull Becker—did you get him?" Val asked.

"No. We figger he musta killed Frost, but we never saw either one of 'em," Brandy answered.

"In that case the Satterfields are licked," Val said jubilantly. Even as they dodged the scattered bullets from the house and kept the Satterfields under cover by a brisk return fire he questioned the outlaw about the location of the place where Ida May was held. According to Brandy it was not more than eight or ten miles out.

"Listen, Brandy," he said. "You can hold 'em here till dark just as easy as I could. What you do after that is no affair of mine. I'm goin' out after Ida May."

"She must think a lot of you," Brandy said. "I heard her offer to marry Clay if Birdie would guarantee that you wouldn't be hurt."

"She did?" Val asked eagerly.

"Yeh, but Birdie told her she didn't give a damn whether she married Clay or not, because she'd personally ruther see the Injuns git her. An' she said she was gonna see you an' old Gentry burned come hell or high water."

It was easy for Val to slip away to his horse. He could hear Brandy shooting at the house, and he realized that the

man would have to hold his place till dark or die horribly, and knew it. Brandy's directions had been explicit. Val found himself vaguely hoping that old Bill hadn't beaten him to the rescue.

Suddenly he recognized the landmark which Brandy had told him was just above where the girl was being held. He dismounted and advanced cautiously through the mesquite. Soon he reached the rim of a depression, and looked down upon the water hole which Brandy had said he would find. But he didn't see Ida May.

What he did see was Clay Satterfield and Seven-up Sorensen securely bound to a couple of mesquite trees!

Val ran recklessly down the slope. The men stiffened with surprise and fear as they saw him. "Where's Ida May?" he demanded, as he shoved his six-gun hard against Sorensen's stomach. "Tell me the truth now, or I'll let you have it right in the guts."

The outlaw swallowed hard before he could answer. When it did come it brought a groan of despair to Val's lips. "The Injuns have got her. They piled in here, and took us by surprise. They told Quanney they'd kill him, too, if he tried to stop 'em. Finally they tied us up an' took Quanney along with 'em. They said they'd been promised some sport an' they wasn't goin' to wait any longer. I reckon they ain't nobody kin save that gal now."

"It was her own fault. If she'd married me it wouldn't have happened," Clay ground out.

Val wheeled and slapped the fellow in the face.

CHAPTER XXI

Clay Satterfield's face whitened from the slap. "The only thing I hope is that them savages git you, too," he grated.

"What I should do is finish you two off right now, because I'll probably have to do it some time," Val retorted.

He inspected their bonds. The Indians had done their work well. "Yuh could at least loosen these thongs," Sorensen whimpered. "They're cuttin' into my writs."

"I hope they cut deeper," Val said unfeelingly. "It may interest you to know that some of your friends went over the big divide this morning, and the rest of 'em are blockaded in Cox's house. You'll have a long time to wait."

He didn't ask which way the Indians had gone. They would have lied to him anyway. He got on his horse and started to make a circle around the camp. He had gone less than a quarter of the distance when he struck the trail.

As he had surmised the Indians were travelling down the river, although keeping several miles from it. He was thankful now for the trail lore he had picked up from Bill Gentry, as well as his own common sense. There were times when it was hard to keep the tracks in sight, but he seldom lost the trail for more than a few minutes at a time.

It was frequently necessary, however, to dismount and lead his horse, and he realized that in spite of everything he was probably making poorer time than the Indians. He had to fight hard against the impulse to guess, and probably lose the trail altogether. Thought of what might be happening to Ida May drove him almost to frenzy. He tried to steady himself with the thought that Bill Gentry or Bull Becker, or both, might be on the trail ahead of him. Even as it came to him that life without Ida May would be a lonely thing at best, he hoped that Bull Becker might be the man to watch the Indians. Becker would not hesitate a second in delivering the girl as he had delivered Jack Cradlebaugh. Tender-hearted old Bill might hesitate a bit too long.

Mile after mile he held to the trail. It had veered a bit now, and he realized the redskins were going around the base of a mountain that lay in their path. The mesquite was thicker now; the trail a little easier to follow. Still he dared not abandon it for once lost in the brush he might never find it again.

He had plenty of time to think about what he would do when he overhauled the Indians. He couldn't just ride in and take the girl away. Unless he could bargain with them there would be one the alternative of bringing about a sure and speedy death for the two of them.

It was the weariness of his horse which warned him of the passage of time. The long evening shadows were crawling across the desert, and he knew that he must be at least twenty-five miles from where he had left Clay Satterfield and Sorensen. It was an even wilder country than he had traversed between Poison Valley and Cox's Landing. The Indian renegades would feel perfectly safe here in perpetuating any atrocity which appealed to their savage brains.

Then, ten minutes after the red rim of sun sank behind the horizon he heard the blood-curdling yells with which he was becoming all too familiar.

He was off his horse in an instant, plunging through the brush. The hideous yells guided him straight to the spot the young demons and apparently chosen for their hellish sport. Val stopped at the edge of a small clearing not two hundred feet from where the wild, half-naked men of the desert cavorted.

They had painted their bodies, and they had got hold of whisky from somewhere, for a jug was being thrown around from mouth to mouth. They were working themselves up to a diabolical frenzy.

To Val the Indians were little more than animated sticks until he located Ida May. She sat upon the ground with her back against a bush, almost completely out of sight from where he was. Every so often some of the young bucks did a wild death dance around the bush.

Val's only weapons were a brace of six-guns and a knife. He had been obliged to leave the rifle with Brandy for his own protection as well as that of the outlaw. It was several minutes before Val could locate Quanney. Then he saw the evil-visaged Ute stalk forward and seize the jug. He spoke rapidly, and some of the young savages scattered to find more wood and brush to add to the pile that was to illuminate their dreadful orgies.

Val had hoped desperately that they might exhaust themselves in anticipation, and wait longer before beginning their ghastly sport, but that hope was doomed by the gestures which the dancing demons now began to make as they passed in front of the girl. There was no hope that he might be able to slip in and get her away.

He counted them desperately. Seventeen, including Quanney. A few more minutes and they would be worked up to such a pitch that even Quanney would be unable to restrain them. He had but one desperate expedient, and he took it. With his hands on his six-guns he circled to where he could plainly see Ida May and stepped boldly out into sight.

An Indian spotted him and gave a yell. For a moment every Indian eye was upon him. He walked slowly forward.

The very audacity of his actions stunned and bewildered the young bucks. As for Quanney he seemed interested in knowing what this crazy young white man intended to do. Val's eyes were watchful. At the first move an Indian made he meant to start shooting—and Ida May would get the first shot.

He saw the girl suddenly rouse herself. Her hands were tied, but otherwise she was free. She sat up, and he saw a look of sick apprehension cross her face. Her lips moved, but he couldn't hear what she said. He was fifty feet away when Quanney held up his hand.

"Stop, white man," he called. "Why you come to die, huh?"

Val stopped. "Look, Quanney," he said steadily. "See these two guns? I don't miss my shots. The first move one of your young men makes I shoot both guns—one at the white girl, the other at you."

One of the bucks asked Quanney a question, which the older Indian answered tersely.

"You die, white men?" Quanney repeated.

"Maybe," Val granted. "But if I die you miss the big reward 'the-woman-who-looks-two-ways' as you call her will pay to have me alive. Tell your young men how much firewater that money will buy."

Again Quanney said something to the Indians which caused them to wait expectantly.

"You speak with a funny tongue," he addressed Val.

"Tell your young men their sport would be spoiled anyway. In the brush waits the grey-beards Bill Gentry and Bull Becker. They will kill the white girl, and many Indians. Let the white girl go with the greybeards, and I will go back to Poison Valley with you. Refuse, and you, me and the white girl all die. So, too, will many of the young bucks. Tell them."

This time Quanney's statement to the savage young murderers was not brief. They didn't like being cheated out of their fun with the girl, but Val guessed that Quanney was telling them that any action on their part would only result in her instant death. Some of them were hard to convince.

Again Val stated his position, definitely and with determination. If they would let the girl go he promised to give up his weapons.

"Don't do it, Val," Ida May cried. "You've got your guns—kill us both. I wouldn't go away, even if I could, and let them torture you."

"Be still, Ida May," he told her. "If you do as I say we'll both have a chance. There's none whatever if you don't."

"I don't want to leave you, Val," she moaned. "I—I—love you."

"And I love you," he told her calmly. "That's why I've got to take this chance. They've got to let you go. I know you're dead beat, but you've got to make one final effort, Ida May. When you leave here you go straight over that ridge there till you find my horse. Get on him and head back to Cox's Landing. Bill Gentry will overtake you. If he don't, go ahead anyway. Don't go into Cox's until daylight. Make Cox put you across the river, and then you follow the trail we talked about."

Ida May was listening intently, trying hard not to miss a word. So, too, was Quanney, who understood English perfectly.

"All right, Quanney, it's a showdown," Val said coolly, although the desperation he felt made every nerve taut as a newly stretched barb wire. "Let the white girl go or I empty

these guns. And remember the two greybeards in the brush. They won't miss. There won't be Injuns enough left alive to sound a war whoop."

It was a desperate ultimatum, and the dark looks on the faces of the barbaric young outlaws made him plenty doubtful that his bluff would work. But delay would gain him nothing. If they hesitated more than a single minute he had steeled himself to put a bullet into the girl's heart—she was facing him now not three rods away and he would not miss—and then get as many red renegades as he could with the next ten shots. The twelfth bullet he would use on himself if he lasted that long.

Quanney seemed to sense his determination. He turned to his evil-looking satellites and spoke rapidly. The sullen looks bespoke their rage and disappointment, but Quanney stepped quickly over to Ida May and slashed the thongs that bound her wrists.

"Go," he said tersely.

"I—I—can't, Val," the girl almost whispered.

"You've got to," he said urgently. "We'll both die right here if you don't. If you go you can get away, and I'll have a good chance. Please do what I ask you."

"All right, Val. Good—good-bye." Her voice choked off a moment, then she moved swiftly through the circle of dark, lowering faces and hurried toward the top of the ridge beyond which was Val's horse.

It was hard for the young Indians to let her go. They were poised on their toes; their hands upon their weapons. As for Val's chance that he had spoken of to the girl he knew that it didn't exist. If he didn't surrender his weapons there in his tracks they would swarm over him, and those he didn't get would pursue the girl. To give her all the chance he could he would have to give up his guns. They would take him to Cross-eyed Birdie to collect the bounty which they knew she would gladly give for the privilege of seeing him given over to the torture. Quanney was smart enough to know that they had everything to gain by taking him back alive, and nothing whatever to lose.

A minute after Ida May disappeared over the hill Quanney stepped forward and held out his hand. "You give up guns—*now*," he commanded.

"Don't be in a hurry," Val said coolly. He was surprised to find now that his objective was achieved that the tautness was gone. Despite the sureness of his own fate he felt strangely at ease. He had come to save a girl he had never seen, and he had succeeded. He didn't believe for a minute that Rube Cox would dare to betray her a second time. "The girl has got to have time to get a start. I don't trust

your young men. Remember the greybeards. They are yet between you and the white girl."

Again Quanney had to interpret to the young bucks, and every second was precious.

Val's best card now was their acceptance of the fact that Bill Gentry, and possibly Bull Becker were somewhere close at hand. It was bad because if it happened to be true that Bill Gentry was anywhere in the vicinity they would start a search for him as quickly as they dared. But old Bill would surely realize exactly what had happened, and he would be warned.

Five slow minutes passed. The young bucks had begun to scatter out slowly until Val was completely surrounded. He dared not try to stop them, for if they killed him they would at once be after Ida May like the wolves they were. They began to close in. Val shoved his guns back in the holsters and folded his arms. They were upon him instantly like a pack of snarling wolves. They bore him to the ground, seized his weapons, tore his clothing, kicked and belaboured him until his face was bloody and his body a mass of bruises.

It was Quanney who finally got them off. He set two of them to trussing him up, and they did the job thoroughly. Finally, he lay helpless upon the ground, unable to move a limb. He could feel the salty taste of his own blood in his mouth.

Then, suddenly, one of the Indians gave an exclamation. They all stopped to listen. Val, lying upon the ground, knew what had caused their alarm. He, too, could hear the drumming of horses' feet upon the ground. A thrill of exultation shot through his body. Bill Gentry *was* at hand, and he was driving away the Indians' horses. On foot they would have no chance to overtake Ida May!

The young bucks broke out with a chorus of angry, excited yells, and more than half of them took to their heels in what was certain to be a futile pursuit of their animals. Val prayed fervently that old Bill would have the good sense to keep on going until he overtook Ida May, but he didn't believe that he would. Sooner or later he would return. Bill Gentry simply wasn't the kind of man who would leave a comrade in distress, but literally for the life of him Val couldn't imagine what old Bill could do.

CHAPTER XXII

If Birdie Satterfield had been unbalanced before, and she certainly was, her rage at finding herself trapped by the man she had expected at last to claim vengeance upon was completely insane.

She had driven two men to their deaths at the point of a gun, and now she cursed her husband, and even Ulas, for being too cowardly to go and get Val Heaton and the traitor, Brandy.

" You Satterfields call yourselves bad men ! " she screeched. " A ten year old child with a toy pistol could scare all of you to death."

" Now listen, Birdie," her husband said placatingly, " that feller k'ain't git away. Come noon Idy May has tuh take her choice. Clay an' Seven-up will be along, an' when they see how matters is they'll slip along the bluff, an' we'll have 'em between us."

" No matter what kind of a trap we fix that Heaton always gets out of it," she retorted. " If Ulas had had the sense of a louse he'd have captured him when he got Ida May."

" Now listen, Birdie," Ulas said. " You sent word you wanted all of 'em alive. It was easy to grab Idy May an' put a gag in her mouth before she woke up, but that stranger was a diff'runt prop'sition. Chances air we'd had tuh kill him tuh git him. I figgered if we locked him in he'd keep till you got here. When I fust saw yuh yuh said I done jest right."

" I guess you did, Ulas," she said somewhat more mildly. " You're the only Satterfield in the bunch got sense. But here we are, not able to get out of this filthy cabin without being shot at. This place ain't safe. It would be just my luck to have a bunch of soldiers or cowboys happen along at the wrong time."

" Well, Birdie, thar's nothin' we kin do about it till Clay comes," Lije reminded her.

But Clay didn't come. Brandy, however, peppered the cabin and the ferry incessantly, much to the annoyance of the irate female leader.

Birdie became more and more like a caged tigress as the afternoon waned, and there was no sign of Clay.

" Something's happened," she declared. " Look: we haven't seen anything of Val Heaton for hours. How do we know he hasn't got away long ago, and there's nobody there but that miserable Brandy ? "

The men agreed that it was possible.

"If you weren't the stupidest oafs in the world you'd have thought of it," she charged.

"I did," Ulas said laconically. "I've got no more taste for a bullet from Brandy's gun that I have from Heaton's."

"Are you just going to sit here then?"

"Till dark. Then we can cover the river while Bergi an' Foss bring the ferry over. Then we'll see about flankin' our friend Brandy."

"In the meantime Heaton will probably have got that damned girl again," Birdie cried.

"Don't be so onreasonable," Lije implored. "How could he git her away from two white men, and over a dozen Injuns?"

"I don't trust him. Just as soon as it gets dark I'm going back there."

It was dark before Brandy allowed them to move. The outlaw realized then that he would have but a matter of minutes to make good his escape. And ten minutes after he had ceased firing they were after him. Brandy heard the ferry creaking across, saw two of his former friends step off it, and join Ulas. A few minutes later he saw them all go on past the house. He waited a few minutes, ran down to the row boat, cast off, and headed for the farther shore. It was the last that Brandy was ever to see of Cox's Landing, or the Satterfields were to see of him.

Half an hour later Birdie and three of the men were on their way back to their last camp. Only Lije, still suffering somewhat from his wounded arm, was left at the Landing. They found Clay and Sorensen still tied up, and in a bad way from the heat. Birdie lashed them bitterly with her tongue.

"We didn't have a chance," Clay contended. "All them young bucks just jumped us at once. Fer a minute I thought they meant to kill us. They said you'd been promisin' 'em some fun, an' all they'd got was trouble, an' too many of 'em gittin' killed. They jest tuk Idy May an' went."

"Hadn't she give up yet?" the woman asked.

"No. She said she'd take the Indians," Clay said bitterly. "Then Heaton came along, an' abused us some more. All I want is tuh git my hands on that dirty curse."

"Bah! If you'd had the courage to fight a mouse you'd have taken that girl long ago. Waiting to have her married to you by a renegade ex-preacher!"

"That was one thing my paw always told us boys—marry yore wimmin first, an' then make 'em toe the mark. If Lije had had the sense tuh make you keep yore place——"

For the second time that day Clay got his face slapped. He relapsed into sullen silence.

"Well, we'll be through with little Ida May at last," Birdie said with satisfaction. "I only hope Heaton tries to save her and they get him."

Birdie spread her blankets apart from the others. Her thoughts were bitter. She had thought many times of getting rid of her husband and taking up with his younger brother Ulas. Then she had fallen in love with Val Heaton like a silly schoolgirl, and he had subjected her to humiliation and injury. But the taste of Ulas would be forever sour. She was sickened with all the Satterfields, but if Val Heaton could be caught and punished she would probably be able to bear with them. If not, she knew that she and the Satterfields were through. She wondered if Lije, Clay and Ulas realized it.

She felt sick whenever she remembered how happy she had felt at the thought of making Val her outlaw consort, or, better yet, going clear away with him to some far off city to spend the illgotten gains of the Satterfields. Her trouble, she thought, was that she was entirely too far above the Satterfields in intellect and in spirit. After all, they were just common outlaws who owed such success as they had had to a certain natural craftiness and cruelty. She had determined to outdo them, and she had gone so far past them that she frightened even herself when she paused to let herself think.

The Indians had gone. She realized that it would probably be months before she saw any of them again. Then Quanney would return with probably an entirely different set of young savages he had managed to seduce.

She found herself wondering about Quanney. He was more like her than any white man she knew. They understood each other. Both had broken every restraint. Her house at Poison Valley was burned. Somehow, she sensed that it could never again be a completely safe rendezvous. She could never bring herself to be an Indian's squaw, of course; but she had influence with Quanney. The Indians knew of remote hiding-places where no white man's foot had ever trod. She would get her two Indian girls, and join Quanney's renegades. The Satterfields could go their own foolish way.

There were times, and this was one of them, when she doubted her own sanity; but she had no power whatever to withstand the savage restlessness which drove her on from one reckless extreme to another. Insanity or not, she realized suddenly that she was sick of her own race. In some remote rendezvous, surrounded by savage splendour, which the loot she had accumulated would build up, she would wait for Quanney and his dupes to bring in captured white prisoners, who would marvel at her appearance and grovel for her mercy until she gave the signal for them to die.

She seemed perfectly calm the next morning. "I'm

through," she told them. "I'm going back to Poison Valley. The Indians will have finished with Ida May before this, and the chances are they've captured Heaton and the old man. But to make sure you'd better try to follow their tracks. If you see Quanney tell him I want to see him."

"You goin' alone?" Ulas asked.

"Why not?"

"Have yuh forgot about Bull Becker? If you happen tuh meet up with him——"

"It'll be too bad for Becker," she said curtly.

"Wimmin are sure funny," Ulas said after she had gone.

"If yuh ask me it'll be better fer the Satterfields if she does meet up with Bull," Clay said viciously.

Birdie did not expect to get home in one day, and she was used to spending nights alone under the stars. Fear had no part whatever in her makeup. She had a goat-skin bag full of water, and plenty of food. After the storm she would find puddles of water for her horse. Instead of taking the direct route home, she detoured in order to travel along the highest route possible. She had good and sufficient reasons for choosing this course.

She was perhaps ten miles on her way when she checked her horse abruptly, and rose in her stirrups. For a long time she remained in that position, with her eyes shaded with her hand. Then, uttering almost a squeal of delight, she set spurs to her horse, and changed directions completely.

Long since Quanney had taught her to read smoke signals, and he could not have sent up one more to her liking. The signal she had caught from her vantage point contained the information that a prisoner had been captured, and was being brought back. It could only mean, she was certain, that Val Heaton was the prisoner.

The others would not be likely to see the smoke signal, and wouldn't be able to interpret it if they did, but Birdie didn't care greatly. She put her horse to a fast and rather reckless gallop. After a couple of miles she reached another ridge and dismounting built a fire and with her saddle blanket sent up a certain number of puffs which would let Quanney know where she was. She repeated the signal three times in the next twenty minutes, and then was rewarded by a short signal which meant simply, "Coming."

She staked her pony to a mesquite tree and relaxed. She had steered the Indians away from the course where they were likely to meet the Satterfields. That was as she wanted it. There was money hidden back in Poison Valley, and it would be easier to get away with it while the outlaws were away, but it didn't greatly matter.

It was perhaps two hours later when she saw Quanney

himself on a ridge a short distance away. She stepped away from the brush and waved her saddle blanket. He saw her and came forward quickly.

"You've got a prisoner, Quanney? Who is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, me ketch-um prisoner. Him white man you call-um Val Heaton."

The look of malicious triumph on her face was something terrifying to see. "Good!" she exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"Young braves bring-um. Soon be here," he responded.

"The girl—what about her? Have—have they—they finished with her?"

"Girl git away," the Indian returned in a surly tone.

"How did that happen?" she asked sharply.

More tersely than any white man could have done he told her what had happened. "Now young braves want plenty firewater and white man's *napias*, or make plenty trouble," he ended.

"They'll get it—more than they expect." Straightforwardly, without haste, she told him of her intention to quit the Satterfields and join his band.

For once the dark, sullen features of the Indian became almost animated. "You fix so Indians get plenty guns—plenty firewater?" he asked.

"I can get you anything you want. You can get anything with money, and I've got plenty of that," she told him.

"You kill-um Satterfields, huh?" the Indian asked bluntly.

Birdie hesitated a moment before answering. "If they try to come after me we will," she declared. "Why don't they hurry up with that man?"

"They come," Quanney said laconically.

Val Heaton was mounted barebaok upon one of the scrubby little ponies the Indians rode. His feet were tied under the horse's belly, and his hands behind his back. One of the young bucks was getting great enjoyment in riding Val's outfit, and punishing the horse with Val's spurs.

Birdie rode up in front of Val. Her eyes, of course, seemed to be looking elsewhere, but there was a bitter triumphant smile upon her hard mouth. She looked him over a long minute before she spoke.

"Well, you did the big and noble thing and sacrificed yourself to save that girl, didn't you? It's too bad it failed. The Satterfields picked your dear little Ida May up an hour ago."

It was a lie out of whole cloth, but Val didn't know it. It struck home, but he managed to keep his face expressionless.

"After thinking it over she has decided that Clay is a better bet than these Indians," Birdie went on.

"Now," he answered, "I think you're lying."

Birdie laughed shortly. "Trying to get a little longer

lease on life, I see," she commented. "Well, I don't care whether you believe me or not. These Indians won't be cheated out of their sport much longer. I shall tell them to do anything they want to you, and this time you may be sure nobody is going to get close enough to interfere—although you're going to pray that they will."

"You could teach these savages a lot of tricks, couldn't you?"

"I'm going to," she answered blandly.

She turned to Quanney and nodded.

In turn the Indian spoke a few words in Navaho to his followers, but they began to protest noisily about something. Finally Quanney stated: "They want big feast and fire-water. They say when white man dead mebbeso you be mad because white girl git away, and no keep word."

"Why, the dirty rats! I thought they wanted to have some fun torturing somebody," she cried.

"White man no get away," Quanney said placidly. "Mebbeso we go back Poison Valley—ketch-um *napias*, firewater, and big eat? Then we go way down deep canyon—in the Colorado. Fine place. Nobody ketch-um. You like."

"All right," Birdie surrendered. "I want to get my girls, and all the money the Satterfields have accumulated." She rode back to confront Val.

"What's the matter—your red devils struck on you?" he asked coolly.

"Oh, no. I'll tell you something, Val Heaton, because I know you'll never get a chance to tell it to anybody else. I'm as sick of the Satterfields as I am of you. Sooner or later the law will catch up with them, but it will never catch me. I'm going to take all their money, and go to live with the Indians in a place no white man will ever find. They won't laugh behind my back at my eyes. They think my eyes mean I'm possessed of evil spirits, and they admire me. I'll be a queen, do you hear? A queen."

"I think the Injuns are plumb right," Val said.

She looked at him speculatively. He had never really made love to her, but he had kissed her, and allowed her to make a fool of herself. She could never forgive that. For a moment some latent merciful instinct rose within her, but she fought it down. The only way for her to exist was to be hard—harder even than the young renegade Indians who were too tough for their own tough people. She turned back to Quanney.

"Tell them to head for Poison Valley. You can tell them that everything there is in there is theirs—after I get what I want. And tell them to be sure that nothing happens to their prisoner."

CHAPTER XXIII

THAT RIDE BACK to Poison Valley was a nightmare to Val Heaton. He was tied so that he couldn't change positions on the sharp-backed pony. The party was making the best time it could, and the pony had constantly to be belaboured along. The young red desperadoes were entirely indifferent as to whether their blows fell upon the pony or its rider. Val's back was a mass of cuts and bruises, and his face little better.

He had all but given up hope that Bill Gentry or Bull Becker might be able to ease his final suffering with a bullet. He tried to get his mind off his troubles by wondering about Birdie Satterfield. The woman seemed tireless, and no matter how fast a pace the Indians set she managed to keep always a little ahead of them. She seemed to have no human feelings whatever. He could understand her only on the supposition that she was the victim of some strange mania. No doubt she would have lost her sanity some time, had she never seen the West, nor have had any kind of deformity. But the life into which she had been plunged had certainly broken every normal restraint that made a civilized being.

The party made only a few short stops, and they rode into Poison Valley perhaps an hour after sun-up. Until then Val had not believed he would be taken back there. He might have one friend there, Delly, but she could do nothing. From a few things he had overheard he very much feared that she and her children might be massacred if Birdie was determined to cut loose from the Satterfields and join the renegades. The thought of that made him struggle momentarily to break his bonds, but it only increased his own misery.

He quickly learned that he had a few hours more to live. Principally this was because the Indians as well as Birdie herself needed rest after the long gruelling ride. The festivities would not begun till dark, although the two Indian girls and Rip were already busy preparing a feast that would appeal to their savage visitors. Val hoped the Indians might become drunk, but Birdie was wisely withholding all liquor for the time being.

They had found nobody on guard, but Quanney had set some of his Indians on duty there with strict injunctions not to fall asleep. Val wondered vaguely what would happen if the Satterfields arrived.

He was himself unloaded from his horse and forced to walk over beside the charred ruins of the house he had caused to burn. Just enough of them remained to offer shade for his

captors, but Val was spreadeagled to the ground, and even his hat taken away so that his face was unprotected from the fierce rays of the sun.

He had seen nothing of Delly or her children, although he did get a momentary view of the haglike visage of the elder Mrs. Satterfield, and noticed that she was smoking her inevitable pipe.

After a time the Indians all seemed to be asleep. Val kept his eyes closed, but he tried desperately to loosen the pegs that fastened him to the ground; but it would have taken a man with a crowbar to pry them up. He had to give up to save needless punishment to his wrists and arms. It was futile anyway, for he was always under the watchful eye of the negro cook, who would give the alarm if he made the slightest progress.

He knew that Birdie had gone over to Frost's house to sleep after she had given the necessary orders. He didn't know, of course, what was transpiring there. If he had it might have given him one fragile thread of hope.

As Birdie entered imperiously, with a command to Delly to get her a cup of coffee and have her children clear out so that she could sleep, the elder Mrs. Satterfield approached her, and stood for a moment with her bare feet planted squarely upon the floor peering at her daughter-in-law from beady, black little eyes.

"Whar's my boys?" she demanded, removing her pipe from her mouth.

"They're down at Cox's Landing hunting for that little hussy, Ida May," Birdie replied carelessly.

"All of 'em?"

Birdie displayed more interest. "Why?" she asked.

"We heered Frost was daid."

"What? Who told you that?"

"We jest heered it. Is it true?"

"Yes it's true," Birdie said bluntly. "Bull Becker got him."

"An' none o' the Satterfields has got Bull Becker?"

"They're after him."

"An' now yo're goin' tuh let them Injuns git drunk to-night an' burn a white man at the stake like he was a nigger. I tol' the boys you'd be the ruination of 'm all, an' you will be," the old woman said.

Birdie seized her roughly by the shoulder. "Look here, you old hag, you stay away from those Indians and that white man or I'll have them burn you, too."

"No use yuh pickin' on maw," Delly said dully.

Birdie glared at them a moment then passed into the bedroom.

Mrs. Satterfield continued to grumble to Delly; then went out to watch proceedings as Rip and the two Indian girls were preparing vast quantities of food for the feast that night. Between the negro cook and the two girls was a long-existent feud. Rip considered Birdie to be "quality" and was her abject slave. He looked down upon the girls as being still lower caste. And he regarded the remainder of the Satterfields as poor white trash.

"·You don't perk up a li'l bit yo' goin' be leff heah with dese Satterfield's," Rip remarked irritably to the girl Jewell.

She didn't reply, and the old lady Satterfield pretended not to hear. The Indian girls were plainly frightened. Badly frightened. Finally Rip disappeared for a few minutes. The old lady got up and walked over to Nancy.

"So Birdie is takin' ye away with her is she?" she asked with her toothless grin.

The girl bit her lip. She had had orders never to talk to this old woman.

Mrs. Satterfield cackled. "You ain' foolin' me," she said. "That Birdie an' them red devils have killed my boys an' now they're takin' all the money an' goin' away with it jest like I tolt Frost an' Lije lotsa times she would. I'm right, ain't I?"

The Indian girl turned upon her fiercely. "You right," she said. "You no keep out of sight to-night they kill you, too. You go."

The senile grin left the old woman's face. She jammed the pipe back in her mouth and hurried away. She didn't return to the house, but went down the creek to a place where she often went to watch the mountain trout as they whisked from bank to shady bank.

She sat there a while, dangling her bare toes in the stream occasionally lookimg back toward the house. Finally she got up and walked down toward the narrows. As she approached the two young Indians on guard they spoke to each other, and moved; but the old woman paid no attention to their grunted inquiry. They knew who she was, and they had orders to let no one into the retreat, but they had no orders to stop anyone going out. They continued to watch until the old lady wandered aimlessly out of sight.

"Well, she won't git to kill me anyway," the woman muttered, as she broke into a trot as soon as she was out of sight of the Indians. Presently she came to a thick cluster of brush, crawled into it, and hid herself so completely that a chipmunk ran unsuspectingly across her body; soon after she fell asleep.

Somehow the long day passed. Val had been given no water. His mouth and throat were parched, and his head ached until it seemed that at each throb it would burst. He

had all but given up hope. Even if the Satterfields arrived, which was in itself doubtful, they would themselves fall into a trap. He would not be permitted to tell how the woman planned to double cross them.

The Indians were still in a heavy sleep, sprawled about on the earth around Val. He could move his head enough to see them, and by raising up he could see Rip working to prepare the barbecue. A young heifer had been slaughtered and spitted, and Rip was watching while the Indian girls took turns turning the dripping carcase upon the spit. It was not pleasant for Val to reflect that in a short time he, too, would in all probability be roasting over the same fire, but without the formality of having his throat cut beforehand.

If Ida May had escaped, and Bill Gentry didn't fall into some trap trying vainly to rescue him Val thought that his death would at least not be in vain. That now, was his one consolation. He was afraid that Bill might already be dead. Knowing his friend as he did he felt that otherwise Bill would have tried to rescue him before now. But by this time Ida May should be across the Colorado and on her way to safety.

He suddenly thought he had taken leave of his senses when he opened his tortured eyes and saw her face! It was a delusion. He knew it was. It had to be. She simply could not be back here in Poison Valley. But—there she was. And, bending over him with a knife was the black man, Rip.

Val felt a tug at his right arm and then it came free. Suddenly he shook off the feeling that it was all an illusion. *It was reality*. Ida May was standing before him with a six-gun pressed against Rip—and the negro, face grey from terror—was cutting him free! The girl was signalling him not to make a noise.

He was as amazed at her get-up as he was at her being there. Instead of her riding outfit she wore the long, bedraggled calico Mother Hubbard that he had seen old lady Satterfield wearing not so long before. He could see that the girl's feet were bare.

For a moment he could hardly use his limbs, so stiff and sore were they. He staggered when he finally got to his feet. Then an Indian moved, and the effect upon Val was electric. He comprehended that if a single Indian awakened their chance to escape would be lost. He dared not even try to get a weapon lest he awaken one of them.

Silently the girl motioned for Rip to start walking. Val had never seen anything quite like the expression on the girl's face. It spoke of something more than courage; of inspiration and high resolve. She was doing a thing so unprecedentedly audacious for her nature that her face glowed with a kind

of spiritual exultation. She would not falter in using that gun; Val knew it; the negro knew it. The coloured man stepped high and easy, realizing that his life would be forfeit, too, if any of these Indians aroused.

Ida May motioned silently for the two Indian girls to join the procession. They came willingly. They hurried through Delly's garden and gained the shelter of the stables. Here they found Delly and her three children. As yet not a word had been spoken.

It was a motley bunch of refugees, Val thought, as he looked the group over. What possible chance they would have to escape from the savages he could not see, yet the girl seemed to know what she was doing, and he was content to follow her lead. By this time he was getting the cramps out of his limbs, and he wished he could lay hands on a weapon.

At any instant he expected to hear a yell of discovery. Reaching the shelter of the brush beyond the creek they all, to Val's surprise, turned up instead of down the stream. They got a few rods beyond the place where Val had fought with Apache Tom before a word was spoken. Then one of the children started to cry, and Delly silenced him with a hand-clap over the mouth.

"Shush!" Ida May warned. "Only a little farther now." She motioned for each of the Indian girls to take a child, and told them to see that nobody cried.

Val noted that she was looking back over her shoulder occasionally with a certain expectancy that didn't seem to be concerned with pursuit. Then, suddenly, came a piercing yell which announced discovery of the escape of the prisoner. Even though Val had been expecting it the sound went through him like an electric shock. He had steeled himself to endure anything, but having this brief taste of freedom had undone the weary hours of building up dogged resolutions.

It sounded like a pack of wild dogs that had just lost a rabbit. Then the distant boom of a rifle beat upon their ears. It had come from beyond the gate-way. Ida May herded her flock deep into the brush, and handed the six-gun to Val like it was a hot iron she wanted to get rid of.

The yells at the house ceased abruptly at the shot, but there came one from farther away, and then another shot, and another.

"Bull Becker," the girl said hurriedly. "He came with me. He said he'd draw the Indians away. We must hide until help comes."

"Strikes me that may be a long time," Val opined.

"No. Help will come. Bill Gentry is bringing it."

A surge of relief swept through Val. He knew now that he had more than half-believed old Bill was dead. It was

fine to know that both he and the old outlaw, Bull Becker, were alive.

Then, while Val kept an eye upon Rip, the girl told her story. It was a brief one. Instead of going back to Cox's Landing as Val had told her she had turned back, determined not to leave Val to the mercies of the savages. It was useless for Val to point out that she could not have aided him then.

When the Indians left their camp Ida May had followed discreetly. She had been overtaken by Bull Becker, absorbed in the same occupation. Becker told her he had seen Bill Gentry, and had sent Val's partner after a party of soldiers whom Becker had sighted the day before searching for the renegade Indians.

" Mr. Becker promised that he would lead the Indians right into the camp of the soldiers," the girl finished.

From the sounds that could be heard it seemed that Becker might do that very thing. Obviously the Indians were now outside the valley and hot on his trail.

" But how did you get in here ? " Val asked.

" Mr. Becker and I were watching the gateway," she explained. "We saw Mother Satterfield come out. She wandered down the creek and I followed her. I saw her slip into some bushes, and when she was asleep I crept up on her. I woke her up and made her change clothes with me. Do you know, she claims Birdie means to run away with Quanney. I can't believe it."

" It's true," Val answered. " I had that from her own lips."

" What manner of woman is she ? " the girl marvelled.

" She's a Devil," Delly put in flatly.

Val suddenly returned the gun to the girl. " You take it," he said . " Shoot this nigger dead if he makes a move. I'm going back and look around."

It was in his mind that Birdie might be alone in the Valley. Her capture would be the best protection they could get. On second thought he decided that the negro needed to be tied up. Nancy, the Indian girl, eagerly volunteered enough buckskin from her leggings to do the trick.

" You mustn't go down there," Ida May pleaded. " It'll be dangerous."

He looked at her fondly. " And that from the girl who walked across a dozen sleepin' savages that she knew would tear her to pieces if just one of 'em woke," he said. " You look scared now, but I'll always know when you claim to be frightened it's just a fake."

" Then take the gun if you must go," she begged.

" No," he refused flatly. So long as there might be one Indian or outlaw around he would not leave them without a weapon.

He stole cautiously back toward the buildings. Just back of the big boulders he had so much reason to remember he stopped and looked toward the house. Two people—Birdie Satterfield and Quanney—were in the yard between Frost's house and the ruins of the big building. Birdie was almost running, signalling to the big Indian to follow her.

They seemed to be heading straight for the face of the cliff which almost overhung the ruins. Val was puzzled until he saw them pause right where the cliff made a sharp angle. He saw the woman point, and then the Indian began to roll aside certain boulders which required all his strength. This done he began to tug and struggle with what seemed to be a massive slab of sandstone. Eventually Birdie had to lend her not inconsiderable strength to the lift, and presently they swung it aside.

The woman descended first into the underground chamber which Val rightly guessed must be the vault in which the loot of the Satterfield gang was kept. The Indian followed her.

Val hesitated only a moment, then taking the chance that he would be seen ran recklessly across the open space in front of the former castle. He was within twenty feet of the underground vault when Quanney's black uncovered head popped up like a prairie dog coming out of its hole. He gave a grunt as he saw the puncher and started to bring up a weapon. But he ducked as Val let go with a rock the size of an orange that just grazed the top of his head.

Val plunged for the opening with mighty bounds. Unless he got that slab in place before they could get out he was a goner. It had taken both of them to lift it up, and he had to get it back alone and dodge their bullets. Both of them, he knew, carried guns.

He stooped to pick up another rock ; one a bit more unwieldy than the first one. He saw a rough stairway hewn in the sandstone leading into an excavated room, and caught a glimpse of Birdie and her escort coming up the stairs.

" Look out ! " he yelled, and flung the rock straight at Quanney. A shot rang out, whispered past his face, but he saw both of them leap back to escape the missle. The grunt he heard Quanney give told him the Indian hadn't been quite quick enough. He seized the end of the huge slab, and with a mighty effort swung it back into place. It didn't quite fit, and a bullet slammed into it from below.

A second back-breaking tug slid the slab into its slot. Birdie's profane screams were automatically cut off. More slugs continued to pound against the bottom of the slab, but the burnt powder would only make it worse for the people imprisoned below.

The slab surged upward as Val stepped away to get one of

the boulders. Evidently Quanney had his shoulders under it. Val leaped upon it with both feet and down went the slab.

In a minute he had enough boulders rolled upon it to withstand all the pressure that could be exerted from below.

Val paused to wipe the sweat from his face. It had been close, but at last he had Birdie Satterfield where she was harmless, at least until released. He turned and hurried back toward the others, but he had no more than gained the cover of the bushes until he heard the Indians coming back. Their triumphant yells told him that Bull Becker's scheme had in some way gone awry.

At imminent risk of discovery Val stayed close to the buildings until he could see what had happened. He soon saw plenty. Bull Becker, his long white beard covered with blood was a prisoner. Surrounding him was the full crew of the Satterfields, led by Lije, Clay and Ulas! Right behind them danced and howled the jubilant young savages.

With a sick feeling in his stomach Val realized that now his enemies would know that he and the others were still in the valley.

CHAPTER XXIV

VAL WAITED just long enough to hear Lije bellowing for his wife before hurrying back to join the others. He found them crouching in the brush with fear. They had heard the return of the Indians and out-laws. Delly was the most hysterical of the lot.

" We gotta go," she cried. " Them Injuns are blood mad. They'll kill my children, an' now Frost is gone them Satterfields won't lift a hand tuh save 'em."

" They won't hurt you," Val said. " The best thing to do is for you and the Indian girls to go back and pretend like nothing had happened. It's impossible for all of us to hide out in this brush."

Ida May joined her pleas with his. When they looked around a few minutes later the Indian girls were gone—which way nobody knew. Finally Delly gathered her brood and started fearfully back.

" I wonder if I shouldn't go back, too," Ida May said. " You could avoid them if it wasn't for me, and I'm sure now that the Satterfields wouldn't let the Indians have me again."

" If one of us goes back we both go," Val told her firmly. " But come on, I think they're going to hunt for Birdie an' Quanney as much as they do us—and I hope they find 'em."

He took a moment to cram a gag into Rip's mouth, and

then they moved as silently as they could through the brush along the creek. Their main hope now was that they could avoid discovery until dark, and the sun was already down.

Before they were out of hearing they realized that the negro had been found by somebody.

As quickly as possible Val got away from the creek, and none too soon; even though the brush there appeared to be a better hiding-place than the little cluster of boulders surrounded by thin, scraggly brush among which they took refuge. Four or five young redskins came along beating the brush at a trot, and passed within fifty feet of where the two lay because it didn't look like a good hiding place. Val knew that Quanney would not have made such a mistake.

Darkness was falling fast now, and it wasn't long until they heard the Indians noisily returning. Not to be fooled, however, Val caught the girl's wrist, and whispered for her not to move. His foresight was justified when a few minutes later they caught sight of a scurrying figure through the brush. The Indians had hoped they would think the search over and become careless. They waited another half-hour before they moved.

Then for the first time, Val told the girl how he had imprisoned Birdie and the Indian. He told her, too, about Bull Becker's capture.

"Oh, they'll torture him," she cried in anguish. "The poor old man."

Val had been thinking that too. He could only hope that it would be delayed until Bill Gentry arrived with help. He was determined that the old outlaw should not be tortured if it meant risking his own life. Bull Becker had earned that favour.

When he tried leaving the girl behind while he went down to spy upon the enemy she calmly placed her hand in his and refused to let go. His pleas and arguments were in vain.

It was dangerous manœuvring. At any time they might stumble upon a lurking Indian. It was a rather dark night, and Val chose to skirt the naked rock on the north side rather than the brush along the creek. They were not more than a hundred yards from where Birdie and the Indian were imprisoned when they stopped. A camp-fire had been built in the yard between the bunk-house and the ruins, and white men and Indians were lined up facing each other. Apparently, as yet, Birdie and the Indian leader had not been found.

The Indians were maintaining a dogged silence, while the white men were being harangued by a stooped old woman who looked even more hideous because of the riding suit she was wearing. From time to time the old woman flung her arm in an accusing gesture at the Indians.

It was apparent that the Satterfields were not impressed by what the old woman was saying. Presently Lije took his mother by the arm and steered her back toward her home. He called back over his shoulder for his brothers to join him.

There seemed to be hard feeling between the outlaws and the Indians, but Val saw enough to know that Becker was a prisoner of the white man, and apparently they were not minded to give him up—so long as he was a possible source of profit.

Some twenty minutes later Val heard a sound. Someone was moving furtively along the face of the cliff toward the excavated vault. He drew the girl close beside him, and listened tensely. He had the six-gun now and he was ready. It was completely dark in the alcove in which they crouched.

A minute later they made out three shadowy figures moving along in single file, stepping high and soft like a man walking over logs and fearing to step upon a snake. The leader was not a rod distant before they recognized him as Lije. The others were Clay and Ulas.

They stopped. Although they spoke in whispers their voices reached the two people in the shadows.

" Ulas, yore hearin' is good. You watch out fer Injuns whilst me an' Clay open the cellar," he heard Lije say.

" Whut if nothin's wrong ? " Ulas asked. " I kain't believe Birdie would throw us over fer a bunch o' lousy redskins."

" I dunno," Lije replied. " She ain't hed no love fer me since I brung her in here. I'd uh thought Ma was runnin' off tuh the mouth if Delly hadn't said whut she did. But she said them Injun gals told her Birdie tol' them she was goin' away with Quanney. I know her well enough tuh know she wouldn't leave nothin' behind thet could be carried."

" Chances air her an' Quanney are layin' somewhere in the brush waitin' tuh give a signal fer them devils tuh murder us," Clay put in.

" Well, we'll soon fin' out iffen she's disturbed the treasure," Lije stated. " Come on, Clay."

The two of them moved on with their bent-kneed locomotion, while the youngest Satterfield moved even closer to the two hidden people and leaned against a rock. The fellow would hear the slightest sound. He might even hear their suppressed breathing. He was listening for someone who might be following rather than someone already there, and this perhaps saved them. Moreover, his back was turned to them.

For a minute Val wrestled with the problem of which was the greater danger, trying to keep quiet, or take a chance on summarily ending that danger at the risk of being heard by the others.

It was a cramp in the leg that decided him. The pain was unbearable. He had to move, and since he might be heard anyway he decided to move while he could still use the limb. He got to his feet, threw his weight testingly upon the cramped leg, and finding the kink straightening out took a step forward.

A sharp, quickly suppressed exclamation came from the cellar. The men there had made some sort of discovery. Ulas turned quickly—and saw Val! Even as the man opened his mouth Val's arm rose and fell. The gun barrel crashed down upon the young outlaw's head, and he crumpled with no more sound than a muffled sigh. Ida May's gasp was slightly louder.

"Ulas! See anybody?" Lije called.

Val realized that he was in for it now. "No," he replied in a husky whisper, realizing that a louder tone would mean instant recognition.

"Come on over, something's up," Lije called back in the same tone.

Swiftly Val thrust the unconscious outlaw's gun into the girl's hand and whispered for her not to move. Then he moved over toward the cellar with as near the bent-kneed walk of a Satterfield as he could muster.

He was more than half-way when he got a break.

"Hey, Lije, there's somethin' in here," Clay jerked out. "I heered a noise."

For an instant the men bent to listen, and Val covered the remaining distance at a run.

"Check!" he shot out crisply. "Don't move."

The hands of the two outlaws went into the air. They were caught completely off guard.

"It's thet damn' Heaton?" Clay marvelled bitterly.

"You betcha," Val said crisply. "The game's up, Satterfields. There'll be a posse in here before you can get away, but I aim to do you a good turn anyway. I can keep you from bein' murdered by the Indians Birdie had turned against you."

"Yuh lie," Clay said.

"I'd knock your teeth out for that if it wasn't yore yelps would warn the Indians," Val retorted. "If you ain't convinced though, Lije, raise that slab. You'll find your wife and Quanney down there. They went down to get your loot and I dropped the slab on 'em."

"So thet's what happened," Lije breathed. "Iffen I git my hands on thet woman——"

"You'll do nothing," Val said sharply. He reached out and got their guns; shoved one under the waist-band of his trousers, and kept the other in his hand. He called to Ida May, and smiled grimly at the looks upon their faces when the girl joined him.

"Yuh damn' little vixen, none o' this wouldn't happened if yuh'd married me like ye'd orter," Clay growled.

"I'd still prefer the Indians to you," the girl said steadily.

"How much nerve have you got, Ida May?" Val asked. "Enough to shoot Clay Satterfield?"

"If you ask me to," the girl answered simply.

"Why, you——" Clay rasped.

"Shut up," Val hissed, "or I'll save her the trouble. Listen, Ida May: you make Clay stand right there against that rock. If he makes one move you let him have it. If I don't get back kill him anyway. I'm taking Lije for a little walk."

"You can't kill me," Lije cried in a panic.

"I didn't suppose you big bad wolves would be such cowards," Val said contemptuously. "I'll not kill you as long as you take orders. Come on."

He was worried about leaving the girl to guard Clay, even though she had demonstrated her pluck and capacity. The fellow was tricky and dangerous. Yet he had one more desperate venture in mind. Bull Becker was still a prisoner, and in deadly peril of his life.

He forced Lije Satterfield ahead of him on a circuit of the cliff until they were directly behind the bunk-house.

"Now, Lije," he said firmly, "I'm going to give you a chance to do something decent for a change. I'm going to let you go back to your men on condition that you let Bull Becker free. You do that and I let Clay live. If you don't you're sure goin' to find yourself short a couple of brothers. What do you say?"

"Them Injuns'll raise hell if Becker gits away. They're mad about us holdin' him now, but we captured him so he's our prisoner."

"You're going to have to fight those Indians anyway, unless they get Quanney and your wife—and your money. But it's up to you. I got one Satterfield to-night, and I'd as soon git me another one."

Lije trembled. He believed Ulas was dead, and he realized that he and Clay were at this man's mercy. He had no reason to expect leniency.

"All right," he surrendered huskily. "I'll call the boys out of the bunk-house for a pow-wow where the Injuns kin see us, but if you want Becker you'll have tuh git him yoreself."

"All right. But you'll find that treachery won't pay."

Val could plainly see the bunk-house when he let Lije go. He followed along slowly, and presently saw the men slipping out of the building toward the fire where the Indians crouched. As soon as the pow-wow had begun Val slipped over to the

building, sidled along the logs, in sight of the outlaws and Indians had it not been for the fire, and let himself in.

The only light was a smoking lamp in the centre of the room, but by its light he could see Bull Becker where he was lashed to a bunk.

The old outlaw didn't move as Val advanced swiftly and cut the ropes which bound him. Without a word Becker reached out and pulled Val's extra weapon from under his waist-band. Then, just as Val reached the door, the dark, evil visage of a young Indian appeared. Val struck out with his gun, caught the savage on the side of the head, but a glancing blow. The fellow went sprawling, but even as he fell he let out a yell.

Instantly the rest of the Indians were on their feet. Their leader had disappeared; they were suspicious of the white outlaws, and now the prisoner they wanted so badly had escaped. They went into a huddle for a moment, then one of them stepped toward the white men, and seized the outlaw Bug-eye by the shirt.

"Quanney gone. White squaw with eyes-that-see-crooked gone. Sat'feel gone. Now greybeard that kill Indian gone. We keep-um this white man till Quanney come, or you fetch-um back greybeard," the Indian said in very broken English.

Bug-eye, never a very bright man at best, had a moment of panic. He jerked away from the Indian, and went for his gun. He never touched it. A knife flashed in the Indian's hand, and it was buried to the hilt in Bug-eye's body.

The horrible death cry of the stricken outlaw was the signal for the red renegades. Almost in mass they flung themselves upon their recent allies.

The white men, caught by surprise, and out-numbered, broke wildly for the shelter of the bunk-house. Some of them didn't reach it, and they were lucky. Instantly the Indians were around the place yelling like demons, and even as the outlaws started to shoot back some of them were trying to set fire to the building.

CHAPTER XXV

VAL and the old outlaw wasted no time getting back to where Val had left Ida May. She rushed to meet them as they approached.

"What's going on?" she cried. "They—they must be killing people."

A red curtain leaping into the sky told them the bunk-house

and Delly's home had been fired. The Indians were again yelling like demons. This time they were not being thwarted in their vengeance.

Val was sick at heart as he thought of Delly and her children and the old woman, but there was nothing he could do for them.

"This is no safe place here," he said. "We'd better get back up the valley. It's possible Delly and her kids may be running that way and we may be able to help them."

"What about Birdie and Quanney, are we going to leave them here?" Ida May asked.

Before Val could answer he heard a sound, and was just in time to see Ulas vanishing behind a cliff. The youngest Satterfield had recovered from the blow he had received. Val made no effort to follow him.

"There's no use letting them out," he replied to the girl's question. "They couldn't do anything with the Indians now if they wanted to. Come on."

He was later to remember a peculiar look upon Bull Becker's face.

They moved as rapidly as they could up the valley. The sounds soon told them that the massacre was over, until the savages found someone else to murder. But it wasn't long until they knew that the renegades were coming up the narrow valley in search of other victims.

Yells off to their left told them someone had been found.

Ordering Ida May to keep hidden the two men ran toward the sound. The two Indian girls were just being dragged out of their hiding-place by two young blood-stained savages. The bucks whirled as Bull Becker let out a war-whoop. Val's shot got one of them in the stomach. Becker got the other one, but not before the fellow's knife had been sunk in the girl Jewell's breast. The death howls of the dying Indians was answered from below.

Val grabbed Nancy's hand and they ran back to Ida May. They ran swiftly through the brush, and it was several minutes before Val discovered that Bull Becker were no longer with them.

He was looking for a place to make a stand when a new sound floated up the valley—the sweetest sound he had ever heard—the bugle call of the U.S. Cavalry. He drew the girls into a thicket and waited. They were no longer being followed.

Half an hour later they made their way back toward the ruins of the buildings. Val heard his own name being called, and recognised Bill Gentry's voice. But he didn't answer until they were within a rod of the old scout.

"Well, you're sure makin' a lot of noise, you old tarantler," he said quietly.

"Val! Why the hell didn't yuh answer? I was shore yuh was dead," Bill exclaimed.

"I wondered if you wasn't," Val told him.

The officer in command, a Captain Blake, came up and was introduced.

"We've been looking for these renegades for weeks," he said. "It looks like we were a little late to save the Satterfields, but I'm glad you folks escaped."

"What about the other women and the children?" Ida May asked anxiously.

"I'm sorry," the captain said. "We've found no children, but we did find two dead women—an old one and a young one."

"Poor Delly," Ida May moaned.

"Wait a minute," Val said. "I've got a hunch."

Followed by Ida May, the captain, and Bill Gentry he led the way to the place where Delly had once hidden Ida May. There, cowering like frightened rabbits, were Delly's three children. Ida May finally coaxed them out.

Val talked things over with the captain. The soldiers had the gateway blocked. As yet they had captured only three or four of the renegades, but they were sure to get the others eventually.

"It's Quanney we want," Captain Blake said. "He's dodged us for years, debauching the young dare-devils of half a dozen tribes, yet never letting us catch sight of him. I'd give my right arm right now to catch that devil, but it's a cinch he's made his getaway. He always does."

"You can keep your arm, Captain, and still get your man," Val smiled. "And also your woman. Cross-eyed Birdie and Quanney are both where they'll do no harm. I can lead you to them."

The captain summoned half a dozen men, and they followed Val to the hewn-out vault. But as they came in sight Val gave an exclamation. The boulders had been rolled away, and the slab door removed. Two bodies lay near the opening. One was Bull Becker, and his hands were locked around the throat of Birdie Satterfield! The old outlaw was breathing still, but the woman was quite dead.

"Look!" Bill Gentry said. "There's yore Injun, Cap'in. Ole Quanney himself. He's shore turned up his moccasins."

It was true. Quanney was lying at the bottom of the crude steps where he had fallen backward, with his feet higher than his head.

Meanwhile Val knelt beside Bull Becker. The old outlaw opened his eyes. "Well, I finally got her, b'Gawd," he whispered. "I made her pay for them three years."

"You were a fool to come after them alone," Val said.

"She made the Injun come up ahead o' her when I opened

the door," Becker got out. "She shot me when I shot him. But I got holt o' her when she tried tuh dodge apast. An' I hung on."

It was evident that he had. There was no beauty left now in the unfortunate woman's once beautiful face. She was purple in colour, and her thickened tongue still protruded. Even now Val could feel it in his heart to feel pity for her.

"One thing 'fore I die," Bull Becker whispered. "Crots-eyed Birdie wanted my gold. Won't—do me—no good—now. Like Idy May to—have it."

For a time the man's breathing was so low they thought he would never speak again. But his eyes opened presently, and Val had to bend low to hear his last whispered words.

"Look in cave—north wall—whee you—found me. Map——" Bull Becker's head fell forward, and he was dead.

Val and Bill remained only long enough to watch the soldiers drag out a steel box half filled with gold and jewellery—all the movable assets, except livestock, of the Satterfield gang. Then they made their way back to where Ida May and the Indian girl Nancy were caring for Delly's children.

Before daybreak every evidence of the brutal massacre had been so far as possible removed by the soldiers. Before noon the last of the young renegades trapped in the valley had surrendered. So far as Val knew only one outlaw was still at large. This was Ulas, the youngest of the Satterfield clan. When the soldiers started to leave Poison Valley the following morning Val didn't object to going with them. He was glad to leave this truly poisonous valley forever.

The party did, however, detour by way of the pocket where Bull Becker had been imprisoned, and a number of the men, including Val and Captain Blake, were let down. There was plenty of grim evidence of the hard life the old outlaw had had to live, and on the wall of his cave, where he had said, were explicit directions how to find a cache of gold, which it was intimated was nearly fifty thousand dollars. The cache, it transpired, was near the Colorado, and not ten miles from Cox's Landing.

"If this belongs to me," Ida May said, when they told her about it, "it will be used for just one purpose."

"And what is that, miss?" Captain Blake asked smilingly.

"To provide for these three children," she answered. "I mean to take care of them in any event."

Somehow, Val found himself riding along beside her, well out of earshot of the others.

"I suppose," he said, "you'll try to find your people the first thing?"

"I don't think so. I have the feeling that if I did find them none of us would be altogether happy," she said soberly.

"I'm sure they'll be glad to have you back," Val said with no great enthusiasm.

"I'm sure of that, but then what? Their life can't be my life. I wouldn't fit in. Then, too, I have Delly's children to look after. And I don't believe they'll like to have it constantly said that their daughter—or their sister—had lived all her life among notorious outlaws. No, Val, I think I'll stay in the West."

"If there's anything I can do to help, Ida May——"

"You can do everything to help," she said shyly. "That is, if you want to."

He bent over and kissed her. "My life, everything I hope to have or to be," he told her earnestly, "is yours."

Some day, he knew, he would insist that she try to locate her people. It would be better so. But not until he and she had started to live their own life together, so that nothing could ever come between them.

THE END

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